

Working Class Politics in the German Revolution

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Working Class Politics in the German Revolution

Richard Müller, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Origins of the Council Movement

By

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B R I L L

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Sisyphus of the Revolution: A Preface

What sort of nation is it that doesn't know its revolutionaries? Richard Müller was a revolutionary. He had a decisive influence on the German Revolution of 1918 and, as head of the Executive Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, he was the head of state of the Socialist Republic of Germany.¹

Although Müller was undoubtedly one of the most influential personalities of the German labour movement, its historiographers have mentioned him only in passing and none has written his biography to date. The present work fills this inexplicable and grievous void.

Ralf Hoffrogge's 'political biography' of Richard Müller deserves particular praise for its wealth of facts. This applies not least to its treatment of Müller's political work during the critical years of 1916 to 1921, including the prelude to and aftermath of the German Revolution. Beyond that, Hoffrogge has also succeeded in illuminating the periods preceding and following those critical years. Müller no longer 'emerges from nowhere and disappears into darkness'. Now we know a few things about his childhood as well as his professional and political work before he appeared in the limelight of history. We also know what Müller achieved afterwards when he was still a union official and – astoundingly – a rather successful entrepreneur. These details must surely have been quite laborious to dig up and they certainly bring us closer to the person of Richard Müller.

This was achieved through intensive interpretation of the source materials and an insightful description of Müller as a person, whom Hoffrogge ultimately characterises as the 'Sisyphus of the Revolution'. This is particularly apt because Müller, the revolutionary and staunch council socialist, would be badly derided by anti-revolutionary social democrats and pseudo-revolutionary state socialists. As Hoffrogge puts it, he was 'crushed between the millstones of social democracy and Marxism-Leninism'.

This well-written work on the life of a labour organiser, revolutionary and, briefly, German head of state who has been largely forgotten despite, or perhaps because of, his important and remarkable life, is rich in material and methodologically correct. It should be read widely.

Wolfgang Wippermann

Professor of History, Freie Universität Berlin
Berlin, June 2008

¹ The German state was officially called the Socialist Republic of Germany by the revolutionary government during November and December 1918.

Author's Preface

This work was first published in German in November 2008 on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the German Revolution of 1918. In its present English form, it constitutes as much a new edition as a translation. It contains new material and research that I have conducted in the last four years, takes relevant new literature into account, has been edited for better flow and readability and corrects small errors in the first edition. I was also able to find rare copies of the magazine *Kampf-Front* from 1928/1929 in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin, which verified facts concerning Richard Müller's engagement with the left-wing union the Deutscher Industrie-Verband during those years. While that research added details without changing the general picture very much, I was able to gain new insights during a research trip to Moscow in the summer of 2012. In the Russian State Archive's (RGASPI) Comintern holdings, I discovered a personal file on Richard Müller that included a long letter he had written containing comments on the political situation in the Weimar Republic up to 1924. The file also revealed that Müller had been a member and active supporter of the KPD until 1924, whereas historians had previously assumed that he had left the party years earlier. All of this new research has been included in this edition.

I would like to use this space to thank everyone whose advice, corrections, and encouragement supported me in completing this work. I would specifically like to thank Ottokar Luban, Ingo Materna, Dirk H. Müller, Ulla Plener, Jörn Schütrumpf, Klaus Kinner, and not least Professor Wolfgang Wippermann and Professor Gerhard Baader at the Freie Universität Berlin for their detailed corrections to the manuscript of the first German version as well as their informed advice and help. I owe my gratitude to a great many other historians and students for their varied advice and suggestions. I would also like to mention my parents, whose support made my studies as well as this book possible.

I would also like to thank the staff of the Bundesarchiv Berlin, the Landesarchiv Berlin, the RGASPI Moscow, and the Archiv der sozialen Demokratie in Bonn. Without their patient help, a great many sources would have been left undiscovered. Daren Zuk and Quinn Richert gave timely and invaluable help in cleaning up the manuscript and bibliography for final submission.

Special thanks go to Radhika Desai and Alan Freeman who first had the idea to make this work accessible to the English-speaking world and supported me for several years with advice. Radhika also acted as a true editor, clarifying, shaping, re-organising and sharpening this text extensively to make it the new improved edition it has become. The heavy work of translation was done by Joseph B. Keady – I owe him gratitude for

his patience and his engagement. I also have to thank Sebastian Budgen and Peter Thomas from the board of *Historical Materialism* and the staff of Brill publishers in Leiden for their support.

Berlin-Neukölln, January 2014

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List of Abbreviations

ADGB	Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (General Federation of German Trade Unions), union confederation 1919–33
AdsD Bonn	Archiv der Sozialen Demokratie Bonn (Archive of Social Democracy, Bonn)
BArch	Bundesarchiv Berlin (Federal Archive, Berlin)
BRD	Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Federal Republic of Germany [FRG], i.e., West Germany until 1990 and the official title of the unified German state since then.)
BzG	<i>Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung</i> (Essays on the History of the Labor Movement), scholarly journal, Berlin (GDR)
CNT	Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, syndicalist union in Spain
DDR	Deutsche Demokratische Republik (German Democratic Republic [GDR] or East Germany)
DMV	Deutscher Metallarbeiter-Verband (German Metalworkers' Union)
DIV	Deutscher Industrie-Verband (German Industrial Union)
EMK	Historische Einwohnermeldekartei (historical resident registry file) in the Landesarchiv Berlin
FAU Gelsenkirchen	Freie Arbeiter-Union, Gelsenkirchener Richtung (Free Workers' Union, Gelsenkirchen tendency), syndicalist union
GDR	German Democratic Republic (East Germany)
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
IWK	<i>Internationale Wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung</i> (International Scientific Correspondence on the History of the German Labor Movement) scholarly journal, West Berlin
KPD	Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Communist Party of Germany)
KAPD	Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (Communist Workers' Party of Germany)
KAG	Kommunistische Arbeitsgemeinschaft (Communist Working Collective), dissenting group that split from the KPD in 1921
Comintern	Communist International or Third International
KZ	Konzentrationslager (concentration camp)
LArch Berlin	Landesarchiv Berlin (State Archive Berlin)
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party or Nazi Party)

Profintern	Red International of Labor Unions (RILU), acronym derived from the Russian name
RGASPI	Rossijskij gosudarstvennyj arxiv sozial'no-politicheskoy istorii (РГАСПИ) (Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History)
RGI	Rote Gewerkschafts-Internationale (see Profintern)
RGO	Revolutionäre Gewerkschafts-Opposition (Revolutionary Union Opposition), communist union movement starting in 1928
RGZ	Reichsgewerkschaftszentrale (the KPD's Communist Union Center, working on a national level)
RILU	Red International of Labor Unions (see Profintern)
RM	Reichsmark (currency of Germany until 1948)
SAPMO-BArch	Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv Berlin (Foundation Archives of Parties and Mass Organisations of the GDR in the Federal Archives)
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany), ruling party of East Germany
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
USPD	Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany)
VKPD	Vereinigte Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (United Communist Party of Germany), a name briefly used by the KPD after its unification with the left wing of the USPD in 1920
ZfG	<i>Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft</i> (Journal of History), Berlin (DDR)
ZK	Zentralkomitee (Central Committee)



Portrait of Richard Müller (date unknown).

BY KIND PERMISSION OF THE ARCHIVE OF KARL DIETZ VERLAG

... [N]othing has etched itself as deeply in my memory as the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, as they were called, who seemed to rise from the creative spirit of the suffering and silent masses unbidden. Names come back as well, the names that are the most closely linked to the preparation for and the act of revolution, names like Laukant or Richard Müller, who later became 'Leichenmüller'... There was a real revolutionary Spartanism among these proletarian conspirators and a suppression of natural feeling that, in its wordlessness, sometimes took on an ancient greatness.

Carl von Ossietzky¹

¹ From a review that Ossietzky wrote for Theodor Pliviers's epic account of the German Revolution, *The Kaiser Goes: The Generals Remain* (Plivier 1933). The review was written from Berlin's Tegel Penitentiary in July 1932 where Ossietzky was serving a sentence for 'betrayal of military secrets'. It appeared under the pseudonym 'Thomas Murner' in the newspaper *Die Weltbühne*. See Ossietzky 1988.

Introduction: A Forgotten Revolutionary

Why do we need a new history of the German Revolution – a revolution that failed nearly a century ago? Why bother with a little-known trade unionist like Richard Müller when we have legends like Rosa Luxemburg?

The answer is because we need to challenge received knowledge of those events. By following the course of Müller's life, this biography presents a new narrative of the German Revolution and the international socialist movement of the early twentieth century.

The novelty of this narrative lies in recalling that the German Revolution that began in 1918 was the first and only socialist revolution to take place in a fully industrialised country. Its failure and the success of socialist revolutions in backward countries in the twentieth century make it hard for us to appreciate just how natural the revolution must have seemed to its participants. After all, only industrialised nations were supposed to be able to advance to socialism. And Germany combined the most centralised industrial capitalism with the most organised working class in the world: that it would fulfil the historic mission anticipated by Marx and Engels must have seemed all but inevitable. Even Lenin and his Bolsheviks felt that their revolution in agrarian Russia would remain precarious unless the Germans made their own and broke the Bolsheviks' isolation. Their hope endured for five long years until a last failed uprising in October 1923 extinguished the possibility of a successful German revolution. In the decades that followed, Marxists around the world would continue to praise the urban proletariat and mostly ignore the fact that every other twentieth-century revolution took place at the margins of capitalism. Though the working class played a role, often a leading one, in these revolutions – from the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to Russia in 1917, China in 1949, Cuba in 1959 and up to the Portuguese Revolution of 1974 – they were all driven by peasant masses, rural workers, and soldiers who mutinied.

By contrast, the working class was the principal protagonist of the German Revolution of 1918. The revolution started with a mutiny of sailors and soldiers, but it came to be driven by workers and their organisations. Germany's industrial labour force had been educated in Marxist theory for two generations and had organised itself by building both the strongest unions and the biggest and most orthodox Marxist party of the Second International: the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), the Social Democratic Party of Germany.

As such, the German Revolution was practically the model Marxist revolution but, like revolutionary movements in other industrial countries at the time, it too failed. Revolutionary defeat in Germany was followed in 1920 by a similar disaster in Italy: a wave of factory occupations all over the country was defeated within months, the Italian labour movement was destroyed and the world's first fascist regime emerged in 1922. That regime became a model for German Nazism, which ended in levels of brutality beyond any political terror that the world had yet seen.

The Politics of Historical Interpretation

The Italian Communist, Antonio Gramsci, famously asked why the revolution had failed in the West and succeeded in the East, precisely the opposite of the predictions of Marxism as it was commonly understood by European Social Democracy until the Bolshevik Revolution. The German Revolution should have been at the centre of the various answers to that question, but was not. West German historiography came to be dominated by a narrative that simply declared the revolution an undesirable source of disorder and civil war and looked forward to a gradual transition to Western-style democracy. That was the consensus between the SPD and the old elites of imperial Germany.¹

Marxist historiography did not substantially correct this dismissal: it hailed the German Revolution but did not dare delve into it too deeply. In both East German and international Marxist-Leninist historiography, the failure of the German Revolution was largely explained as a 'betrayal' by leading Social Democratic politicians, of a piece with the betrayal that saw the parties of the Second International abandoning their internationalism in favour of nationalism on the eve of the First World War. This narrative, which would be shared by dissident currents within Marxism and in popular political debates, originated in Lenin's 1918 pamphlet, *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*.² Its polemical target was revisionism, a tendency to revise Marxism in a reformist direction. Though Lenin's 1918 pamphlet found it politically convenient to pin it on Kautsky, revisionism referred to the famous controversy between Eduard Bernstein and the defenders of 'orthodox Marxism' like Rosa Luxemburg in the German Social Democratic Party of the 1890s, when Kautsky

¹ The most detailed narrative of Germany, a Central European country, 'going west' towards the path of Western European democracy and parliamentarism was presented by Heinrich August Winkler: *Germany: The Long Road West*, Winkler 2006b.

² Lenin 1974, pp. 227–325.

had, in fact, opposed the revisionists. Nevertheless, the revisionists, as they are described to this day, were said to have weakened not only German Marxism but the Second International as a whole.

But was it only renegade revisionism and individual betrayal that caused the breakdown and the schism within international socialism during the Great War of 1914–18 and eventually the failure of the German Revolution? It is odd indeed for an intellectual tradition emphasising the dynamics of economy and social classes as the moving force of history to come up with an explanation focused entirely on individuals and their ‘wrong’ ideas. Apart from being embarrassingly idealist, most discussions about ‘revisionism’ also ignore the fact that leading ‘revisionists’ spoke out *against* the war and even broke with the nationalist mainstream of the German Social Democrats. In 1917, both Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky became members of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD), a party that also included Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, and their Spartacus League. Thus every position in the debates of the 1890s – far left, centre, and revisionist – were united in one party. The implication is that the connection between pre-war revisionism, the breakdown of the Second International in 1914, and the failure of the German Revolution must be more complex. It must be hidden deeper in the social and class relations of German society and their cultural and political manifestations.

Writers of German political history have addressed this question and have done much to overcome the focus on great men and their decisions. Both the USPD and the SPD have been analysed in terms of social history. The pioneering work by Dieter Groh on the Social Democrats’ politics of ‘*attentismus*’, effectively a politics of waiting for the revolution,³ is a good example. Groh describes a Social Democratic Party whose success at improving the German workers’ living conditions led it to political passivity that Bernstein and others only reflected but did not create. Other studies on the Independent Socialists and their indecisive course starting in 1917 have pointed to how a party that was created for the sole purpose of opposing the war inevitably included a range of different political positions on other questions, including revisionism.⁴ Finally, such a social history approach has more recently been extended to the Communist Party of Germany (KPD).⁵ Eric D. Weitz and Klaus Michael Mallmann analysed German Communism not as a succession of party lines and leaders but as a social milieu with a genuine culture formed by workers

³ Groh 1973.

⁴ Morgan 1975, Krause 1975, Engelmann and Naumann 1993.

⁵ Weitz 1997, Mallmann 1996. For the Spartacus League as forerunner of the KPD see Pelz 1987.

with specific grievances and desires that the party leaders had to address if they wanted to achieve anything politically. And such social history has, thanks to its recent access to previously inaccessible East German and Soviet archives, even begun to transcend Cold War preoccupations. The treatment of the German Revolution, however, is yet to benefit from these advances.

Worse, in Germany today, there persists a tendency to ignore the labour movement's long history on the ground that its ideas were 'proven wrong' by the downfall of the East German state in 1989.⁶ This tendency assumes that the East German state, with its *Stasi* police and the Berlin Wall, was the legitimate successor of the German labour movement. Such an assumption is simplistic. Equating the socialism of the German Revolution with the crimes of German state socialism after 1949 ignores history and the broad masses of workers who, in 1918, demanded socialism and were opposed to the Social Democratic leadership but never supported a single-party dictatorship. Moreover, most of those whom the Revolution mobilised were not party members and therefore did not fit into the later scheme of Communists vs. Social Democrats. Nevertheless the German Revolution of 1918 is still analysed through a Cold War lens that only sees Spartacists and the SPD; dictatorial communism or parliamentary democracy.

To end this historiographical Cold War, which still obscures our understanding of the German Revolution, we must avoid the trap of identifying the 'revisionists' of the 1890s with political constellations that evolved a generation later around the 'Marxism-Leninism' that Stalin canonised,⁷ and look instead at the real political currents and figures that made the German Revolution.

The Makers of the German Revolution

Only when we do so will we discern the figure of union leader Richard Müller on the historical stage. Rather than political parties, the focal point for most historiography of interwar Germany, the German Revolution was the work of the strong German union movement which, in 1913, organised two-and-a-half-million workers and was the biggest socialist union movement in the world. With its day-to-day involvement in shop-floor struggles over working conditions and work organisation as well as pay, the unions represented the working

⁶ See Chapter 11 ('Footnotes and Suppression: Richard Müller's Impact on Historiography') of this book for a more in-depth discussion of the historiography of the German Revolution.

⁷ The authoritative outline of Leninism was given by Stalin in his essay *Concerning Questions of Leninism*, and remained widely accepted even after de-Stalinisation. See Stalin 1954 [1926].

class in a way that was very different from any party. They had to address the events of August 1914 in terms that went beyond slogans about internationalism or revisionism to touch on concrete issues that war raised for working people, such as longer hours and food shortages.

While the top German union leadership, which was complicit with the war, sought to justify these wartime hardships, Richard Müller and a group of low- and mid-rank unionists from the Berlin metal industry worked to sabotage the war effort starting in 1916. With political mass strikes, they mobilised several hundred thousand workers, interrupted ammunition production, frightened the military command with this unprecedented act of high treason, and became the most important anti-war opposition within Germany. The influence of Müller's group, which later took the name Revolutionary Shop Stewards (*Revolutionäre Obleute*), was much greater than that of the Spartacists. It was neither Karl Liebknecht nor Rosa Luxemburg but these Revolutionary Shop Stewards and their informal leader Richard Müller who organised the Berlin uprising on 9 November 1918. They later became the organising core of the council movement and it was a group of Revolutionary Shop Stewards who, this time against Müller's dissenting opinion, led the famous uprising that would be incorrectly remembered as the 'Spartacus Uprising' in January 1919.

Nevertheless little has been written in German history books about the metalworkers' opposition during World War I and even less has been translated into other languages.⁸ The Stewards are mostly ignored in West German historiography because they opposed the Social Democrats' more institutionalised politics. And when the KPD and the East German Socialist Unity Party (SED) canonised the Spartacists as their founding fathers, any critique of their tactics became blasphemy. The Stewards, who had criticised the Spartacists at several junctures, would now either be ignored in East German historiography or disparaged as 'reformists'. In English-language publications, the Stewards are not even misrepresented, just side-lined. So far, no monograph on the stewards exists in any language.⁹

8 The standard account so far has been Opel 1957 and a study by Dirk H. Müller (Müller 1985a), which includes a chapter on the Revolutionary Stewards. Among English-language writers, David H. Morgan referred to the Stewards' movement in his history of the USPD: see Morgan 1975. An essay by the author was recently translated, but no monograph on the Revolutionary Stewards exists at present. See Hoffrogge 201b.

9 The Stewards play a major part in Comack 2012, and Gluckstein 1985. Both focus on the council movement rather than on the Stewards' origin and later demise. See also Morgan 1975, which focuses on the USPD, and Broué 2006.

The present book aims to correct this omission, which is a misconception about the German Revolution as such. It will tell the story of Richard Müller and his group in Berlin. Though not, by far, the only place where the German Revolution happened – there were short-lived Council Republics in Bremen, Munich and Brunswick in spring 1919 – it nevertheless makes sense to concentrate on Müller and his group in Berlin. Berlin was decisive: an industrial metropolis, a major centre of the German Labour movement and capital of the German Empire. Events happening here inspired the rest of Germany and became decisive for the course of the German Revolution. When, between 1916 and 1918, the Berlin Stewards organised the first political mass strikes Germany had ever seen in the face of massive resistance from their own union leadership and the Social Democratic Party, Müller and his group proved that they represented the majority of German workers. This biography of the Stewards' spokesman, Richard Müller, therefore attempts to reconstruct the motives and practices of this forgotten but truly representative organisation of the German working class.

In 1916, Richard Müller (1880–1943) and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards laid the groundwork for the upheaval that was to come two years later. In the revolutionary government of 1918, Richard Müller became chairman of the Executive Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, the revolutionary councils' highest organ. This effectively made him the head of state of the Socialist Republic of Germany in November and December 1918. This short-lived socialist state has today been forgotten, lumped together with the ill-fated Weimar Republic that replaced it. Our biography of Müller must, however, recall its distinct history. After the collapse of the Socialist Republic, Müller and his left-wing comrades in the German Metalworkers Union, the largest trade union in the world in its day, ensured that it would become the only major German union to support the council system at its national congress in October 1919.

Looking back, however, paving the way for the German Revolution would be the high point of Richard Müller's political life. While his influence by the end of 1918 far exceeded that of Karl Liebknecht, who regularly cursed Müller when he and his Spartacist group were sidelined, that balance of power would soon change. Although Müller outlived Liebknecht and helped shape the decisive first years of the Weimar Republic, the political tradition that Liebknecht and Luxemburg founded proved to be stronger, leaving a mark on both history and historiography. Independent socialism and the council system, the political forms that Müller championed, were ground down between the millstones of Social Democracy and Marxism-Leninism. The period of Müller's political influence was, therefore, brief. He had experienced a rapid political rise as a strike and union leader after 1916 and, by April 1921, had already ceased to hold

any position of influence. That was when he had to resign all his political positions after a factional dispute resulted in his losing his position as the KPD's chief union organiser. Like many former council socialists and opponents of the war, Richard Müller had left the SPD first for the party of independent, that is to say, anti-war, socialists, the USPD, and then joined the newly-formed German Communist Party, the KPD. He did not stay long. After 1921, Müller was not allowed to hold any kind of party position and in 1924 the KPD made a move to expel him for good. Müller protested and we do not know whether he was successful.

Although there has been some outstanding research acknowledging the role of the council movement in the formation of the Weimar Republic, to date there has been scant biographical work on this topic.¹⁰ The key figures in the council movement remain obscure even though the movement marked a major turning point in the history of the international labour movement, not only in Germany.¹¹ Nor is it sufficiently widely appreciated how profoundly the council movement changed German socialists' vision of the future socialist society. The highly organised Social Democratic Party in the second half of the nineteenth century had imagined socialism as an orderly *Zukunftsstaat*, a 'future state', emphasising the state apparatus and rational economic planning.¹² The workers' councils that Richard Müller helped establish imagined instead a radical kind of socialism from below in which mass participation was prior to, and necessary for, planning. The agents of change were therefore imagined in a very different way: while the political party was imagined as the sole agent of change in social democratic politics until 1918, the council movement reintroduced the working masses themselves into socialist political theory and practice.¹³ So a biography of Müller must present a different narrative of the German Revolution, a narrative that focuses neither on the traditional party elites of German politics and the state nor on the members of the powerless pre-1918 German parliament. When examining the life of Richard Müller, the lathe operator who became the head of state in the closing months of 1918, we examine the personal and political motives that went into the mass mobilisation

¹⁰ Peter von Oertzen's definitive work *Betriebsräte in der Novemberrevolution* should be mentioned here, see von Oertzen 1976.

¹¹ For the first attempt to write a global history of workers' councils and workers' control, see Azzellini and Ness 2011.

¹² Germany, where syndicalist and anarchist traditions were much weaker than in France or Spain, is a particular example of this development in parallel with the rise of Marxism as the hegemonic political theory of the labour movement. See Hoffrogge 2011a.

¹³ For more on the conceptual break, see also Hoffrogge 2009.

and mass radicalisation of the years 1916–19. The German Revolution emerges not as a series of statist political manoeuvres in parliaments and other traditional sites of power but as a social struggle arising from the trenches and shop floors – a struggle that ultimately led to massive social change in every sphere of society from the very bottom to the top. Although it has been said that the revolution failed in its socialist goals, it nevertheless radically changed society. It ended the Great War, introduced the eight-hour workday, and brought down the authoritarian German monarchy in favour of a liberal parliamentary system that included women's suffrage.

Richard Müller's life exemplified the process that made those changes possible; understanding it is essential for a full appreciation of the social and intellectual history of the German Revolution. The 'pure council system' that he and his USPD-comrade, Ernst Däumig, developed not only influenced the labour movement in the wake of the German Revolution but was also a source of inspiration for Karl Korsch, who worked on council socialist newspaper projects with Müller in 1919 and 1929. Korsch would later become one of Europe's most important Marxists and, alongside Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukács, is considered a co-founder of Western Marxism.¹⁴

Like his thinking on councils, Müller's historical writings also retain their potency to this day. Müller started them in 1923, writing down his experiences for future generations. His three-volume work, *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik* (From Empire to Republic), published from 1924 to 1925, is the most important contemporary depiction of the German Revolution from a Marxist perspective. Its three volumes were rediscovered in the 1960s and informed the West German student movement's view of history through numerous pirated editions before being 'officially' reissued several times starting in 1974.¹⁵ To this day, no bibliography of the German Revolution can ignore this stirringly written account, which is supported by various original sources and forms the basis for numerous portrayals of the period. But while Müller's historical work tends to be read chiefly for its wealth of facts, his interpretations have failed to engage historians. While West Germany's student movement and segments

¹⁴ On the concept of Western Marxism see Anderson 1976.

¹⁵ The most recent edition, *Eine Geschichte der Novemberrevolution*, collects the three works in one volume, see Müller 2011. Müller's writings have also been reissued in anthologies. Some of Müller's texts in English translation are collected in Kuhn 2012. German anthologies include Schneider and Kuda 1968, Panther 2007. Citation of Müller's three historical volumes in this study are from the first reissue of 1979, published by Olle and Wolter in West Berlin. Page numbers are identical to the 1924/25 edition, except for vol. 1, *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik*, where they differ due to the addition of a preface.

of its labour union spectrum took considerable interest in the issues Müller raised, he was considered a ‘radical leftist’ outside those circles and excluded from mainstream discourse on German history.¹⁶

This political biography seeks to reverse this exclusion in part by taking Müller’s historical interpretations and his account of the revolution seriously, although not, as the reader will see, uncritically. The biography’s narrative of the revolution weaves together documents dating from the event in question with Müller’s histories, written a few years later.

It also seeks to recover Müller from the undeserved obscurity to which he has been confined. His personal development and political activities are at its core.¹⁷ They are especially interesting because Müller was one of the few leaders of the working class movement who was himself a worker, hailing from obscurity and poverty. But precisely these origins mean that there remain considerable gaps in Müller’s biography due to deficient source material. Richard Müller is one of those historical figures who emerge from anonymity in the heat of political events to change their course and then disappear once again into obscurity. Most of the documentation of his life is connected to the anti-war opposition, the German Revolution, and its aftermath, i.e. roughly from 1914 to 1925. That is also the focal point of this work. There is little documentation of Richard Müller’s childhood and youth or his activities after he completed his books, the last of which appeared in 1925. This is why Wolfgang Abendroth also ended his treatment of Richard Müller in his well-known lectures on the history of the European labour movement with the simple words, ‘Then his tracks lose themselves in history’.¹⁸ I was able to retrace some of these lost tracks, but others remain obscure. Apart from a few key points, such as family members’ names and birthdates, Müller’s private life is particularly unknown terrain. For this reason alone, the present volume must confine itself to being a political biography limited to Richard Müller’s public impact.

Such an enterprise is particularly prone to the danger of contributing to the already great gender bias of historiography by writing just another account

¹⁶ Eberhard Kolb, for example, who called Müller’s work ‘the definitive account of the revolution from the radical left perspective,’ exemplified the paradoxical simultaneous recognition and exclusion of Müller’s work: see Kolb 1968, p. 44, footnote 5. On the historiography of the German Revolution see Niess 2012. For more on the history of the reception of Müller’s writings, see also chapter 11 (‘Footnotes and Suppression: Richard Müller’s Impact on Historiography’) in this volume.

¹⁷ The present work describes and elaborates on Müller’s council theory without discussing it exhaustively. Such discussions already exist, as do comparisons with other council theories. See Hottmann 1980, Arnold 1985, von Oertzen 1976.

¹⁸ Abendroth 1985, p. 187.

of a ‘great man’ in history. Though it supported women’s suffrage and other demands for women’s emancipation, the German labour movement was almost entirely led by men. This was despite the integration of large numbers of female workers into production during World War I, giving the industrial working class a more mixed composition.¹⁹ Giving this work a gender dimension is also made difficult by the dearth of information about Müller’s private life. To be pursued fully, it would require an investigation of the constructions of masculinity in labour movement circles. I have nonetheless attempted to keep the gender-historical dimension visible where available information makes this possible and have attempted not to leave the sources’ marginalisation of women’s roles unexamined.

This biography is not intended to be a hero’s story but a reconstruction of a political life in its time framed by analyses of political events such as World War I, the German Revolution, or the Bolshevizing of the KPD, whose causes and dynamics are understood as social. In doing this, the present work not only rejects the ‘history of great men’ approach but also criticises it by clarifying the limitations of the individual’s opportunities to act. At the same time, while not intending to diminish his weaknesses or errors, this work shows over and over again that the roots of what appeared to be very personal political failures of Richard Müller lay in the historical failures of a movement, a revolution, or a class.

But neither should we deny that an individual may break down, give up, or even become corrupt in the wake of such a failure. At the end of his life, Richard Müller was an active entrepreneur and the only reason we know anything about his life during this period is that his name appears in the daily papers in association with allegedly dubious business practices in construction and as a landlord.

This unexpected turn may seem strange, unpleasant, or inappropriate, but it demonstrates a quite banal transition from politics to privacy amid the ruination of ideals and underlines the biographer’s work of tracking down the tired facts. As the following pages show, tensions and occasional hard breaks, errors, and aberrations such as these litter Müller’s life. They offer a richer subject matter for posterity than clear-cut success stories do.

¹⁹ This was already an issue. In 1921, under the headline ‘The Unions and Women,’ the newspaper *Der kommunistische Gewerkschafter* (vol. 1921, no. 2) criticised the fact that there were ‘only a tiny number’ of female officials ‘compared with how many should have been taken on given the strength of their numbers’ in the rank and file. The article blamed women’s passivity on union activities and argued that it had to be counteracted because it worked in favour of capitalism.

CHAPTER 2

Background, Youth, and Early Union Activities: 1880–1913

Richard Louis Müller was born on 9 December 1880 at two o'clock in the afternoon in the village of Weira in what is now the German state of Thuringia. Then, as now, Weira was an agricultural town with about 500 residents. Müller's parents, Otto Friedrich Müller (born 1848) and Wilhelmina Albina Müller (born 1853), managed an inn while maintaining a farm on the side. Richard was the fourth of seven children born into the family between 1875 and 1884; his brother Friedrich, born in 1882, died within a few weeks of his birth.¹

The family received a blow shortly before Richard's eighth birthday: his mother, Wilhelmina, died on 25 November 1888. The seventh child, a boy named Franklin Arno, had been born two weeks earlier on 8 November and it is not unlikely that Wilhelmina died due to labour complications. Otto Friedrich Müller was left alone with his six children for two years until he married a nineteen-year-old girl named Ulrike Zimmermann, the daughter of a brick-layer from the village. We can only guess at how the older siblings got along with a stepmother who was only six or seven years older than they were and at how the young woman felt about suddenly having to run a household with six children. By the end of her first three years of marriage, Ulrike Müller had two children: one in 1893 and one in 1896, bringing the family to ten members.

Misfortune struck the Müllers again in the summer of 1896: the father died on 26 July, leaving the family facing bankruptcy. The inn had to be sold in October of the same year. That the family faced bankruptcy so soon after Otto's death, along with the existence of the farming sideline, allow us to surmise that the inn had long failed to yield enough for the family and that the family's financial situation had already been shaky.²

¹ All information about Richard Müller's parents, siblings, and childhood comes from the Weira parish register, and I am very grateful to Father Dieter Wolf of Neunhofen for his kind support.

² Although the parish register lists a 'landowner' (*Gutsbesitzer*) as Richard Müller's godfather, it is unlikely that he was very well-off given the circumstances, and the bankruptcy in particular.

From Farm to Factory

It must have been clear to Richard Müller from his earliest childhood that, as the fourth of eight siblings in a financially precarious family, there was no substantial inheritance waiting for him. We can be reasonably certain that he had to work at the inn and on the farm from a young age to contribute to the family income. While it is not clear whether Richard Müller began his apprenticeship as a lathe operator at this time or earlier, his father's death and subsequent family bankruptcy, which occurred when he was 16, must have given him and his three older siblings final confirmation that they would have to fend for themselves from then on. And this meant leaving Weira: its rural economy could not offer them a secure future, while Germany's rapidly accelerating industrialisation following the establishment of the Empire in 1870 offered them new opportunities.³



Weira, 2012.

³ His brothers, Franz Otto (born 1877) and Franklin Arno (born 1888), also left Weira; both were employed by different railroad companies. Franz Otto Müller was able to finish school, going so far as to earn an engineering degree in Graz. Hugo Müller also left, following his brother Richard to Berlin and working for the fire department there.

Like so many young men of his generation, he left his village a farmer's son to become an industrial worker; this quintessentially working class passage would mark his life for decades to follow.

Müller apprenticed as a lathe operator. He would later describe the work – grinding metal parts on an electric lathe – as relying less on 'strength and more on intelligence, experience, the machine, the tools, and, not least, the technical state of the shop as a whole'.⁴ Lathe operators were skilled workers in a modern and technological environment, not unlike artisans or craftsmen in terms of their learned and not easily replaceable expertise. Integration into large factories with an extensive division of labour and often several thousand employees, however, ensured that lathe operators, particularly in the larger cities, gave up their identity as skilled craft workers relatively quickly and for the most part developed a higher level of class consciousness as they moved from the world of craftsmanship to that of industrial capitalism.

We can infer from Müller's apprenticeship that he had no education beyond the eight years of primary school that was common at the time.⁵ So he would have taught himself politics and history through the labour movement's press and educational institutions, like so many of his later comrades with a provincial working-class childhood, comparatively late in life. Weira had always been an agricultural village with a small enough population for everyone to know everyone else personally; only the neighbouring towns had any industry.⁶ Until he started his apprenticeship, Müller knew only a village world of personal relationships and work at the inn and on the family farm. On apprenticesing as a lathe operator and leaving his family, he would become acquainted with alienated wage labour, the exploitation associated with it, strikes, and labour struggles.⁷ Nothing more precise is known about his coming of age

4 Richard Müller: 'Das moderne Akkord- und Kalkulationssystem in der Dreherei', *Deutsche*, no. 43, 10/28/1911.

5 Müller, with the help of a translator, filled out a personal questionnaire during his trip to the founding congress of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) in Moscow, 1921. It states that he attended a *seljckaya shkola*, which would be a 'village school'. See: Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343.

6 Personal communication from Bernd Klimesch, former mayor of Weira, whom I would also like to thank for his inquiries on my behalf.

7 Many young people were radicalised by their experiences with rampant child labour in the cities. However they were not able to find much political guidance unless they came from the families of Social Democrats. It was only at the turn of the century that an organised socialist youth movement arose despite a government prohibition and the reservations of legalistic Social Democrats. Vivid accounts can be found in the memoirs of the East German writer Karl Grünberg: Grünberg 1983, pp. 53–5.

period; apart from the fact that he was a lathe apprentice, we have no details about Müller's youth between the ages of 16 and 21. He only joined the Deutscher Metallarbeiter Verband (German Metalworkers Union [DMV]) at 26, probably at the same time that he became a member of the Social Democratic Party.⁸

It was not until 1902, when he was 21, that another turning point in Richard Müller's life was documented: his marriage. On 1 September he was married to Katharina Hedwig Dietrich in Hanover. Katharina, who was a year younger than he was, came from Essen.⁹ They had two children: a son named Arno Hugo, born on 27 December, 1904, and a daughter named Helene Hildegard, born on 11 April, 1907. Given that the wedding was in Hanover and that the couple's first child was born there too, we can assume that the couple lived there at least between 1902 and 1904 before moving to Berlin.¹⁰

The name of the firstborn is telling: he was named after Richard Müller's younger siblings Hugo Franklin (born 1884) and Franklin Arno (born 1888). Müller seems to have had a particular connection with his two younger brothers; it is possible that he took both of them under his wing to some extent after their father died. Hugo Müller would also live in Berlin later, working there as a fire fighter at a station on Unter den Linden, the city's central boulevard. He shared Richard's socialist perspective and supported his brother's political work before and during the German Revolution, which also suggests a close political relationship between them.¹¹

Müller's Private Life

Little else is known about Richard Müller's family life. His wife and children appear in the public record only once more: during an attempt to arrest his father in 1919, the then 14-year-old Arno was briefly abducted.¹² The other

⁸ The date of his union membership is listed in two biographical handbooks: Schröder 1986, Roß 2000.

⁹ Hanover registry office, certificate no. 1205/1902. Thanks to Andreas Herbst for this information.

¹⁰ His son's birthplace is listed in his entry in the *Einwohnermeldekartei* (resident registry file) (EMK) Berlin in the Landesarchiv Berlin. Unfortunately, the registry files for his daughter as well as for Richard Müller himself are missing. See LArch Berlin, EMK.

¹¹ Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, pp. 261 and 273. Hugo Müller is also mentioned by the contemporary witness Karl Feierabend in an oral history interview file, LArch Berlin, C Rep 902-02-04, no. 41.

¹² *Die Republik*, *Die Freiheit*, *Die Rote Fahne*, each article dated 7 February 1919. The first names of his wife and his son were not mentioned, but from the age and last name of the abducted person, we can surmise that it must have been Arno.

available sources on Richard Müller deal with his political life and impact exclusively; his private and family lives remain largely unknown. It is therefore unclear, for example, just when exactly the family moved to Berlin, though an article he wrote in 1911 appears to suggest that he had been living in Berlin for some time by then.¹³ Nor do we know whether his wife was also politically active in any way. Traditional gender roles probably prevailed in their family life and Katharina Müller most likely lived as a housewife after their children were born. Richard himself would have had little time to raise the children due to his work and in particular his later political activities. His wages as a skilled worker and the income he received later on through his various positions in the labour movement would have allowed his family to survive without additional income from his wife and children. Müller made only one remark that is known today about women's participation in paid labour. He by no means rejected it entirely, but he opposed women doing hard physical labour which he felt was 'not at all suited to the female body' and thought that their working day should be shorter than that of men: 'A workday of 12 hours is certainly too long for a man, but it amounts to a crime for women and girls'.¹⁴

If this concern for the 'fair sex' appears rather paternalistic, we must remember that the First World War munitions factories to which he was referring regularly exposed women to conditions dangerous to their health and that Müller did not demand the prohibition or restriction of women's paid labour. On the contrary, he was eager to win over female workers to union work in order to improve working conditions for women as well as men.

Scanty as they are, these pronouncements on women's paid labour allow us to conclude that Müller would probably not have been enthusiastic about his wife going to work in a standard factory of the time. Traditional gender roles usually prevailed and were left unexamined in the family lives of union members and socialists of the time. That the German labour movement took

¹³ *Deutsche Metallarbeiter-Zeitung*, no. 43, October 28, 1911. A number of facts about Müller's various homes have been reconstructed from his son Arno Hugo Müller's entry in the historical *Einwohnermeldekartei* (EMK) Berlin and an entry in the Berlin commercial register, relating to a firm Müller later owned. It shows that the family lived at Werderstrasse 19 in Tempelhof near Berlin from 29 March 1912 and before that at Klödenstrasse 2, but it does not provide a clearly identifiable date for the earlier residence. The family moved to Werderstrasse 31 in 1918 and stayed at that address until 1930. See LArch Berlin, EMK as well as the entry 'Phöbus-Bau GmbH' in the Berlin commercial register, 2nd section, 1930 (Richard Müller was manager of Phöbus-Bau GmbH in 1930). The address Seestrasse 1 in Senzig near Königs Wusterhausen has been verified for 1932 (see SAPMO Barch RY 23/45); I was unable to verify the address Friedrich-Karl-Strasse 114, which is listed in the second volume of the published Executive Council transcripts: Engel, Holtz, Materna 1997 p. 172.

¹⁴ Müller 1915, p. 28.

progressive positions on women's suffrage and was open to outstanding individual female politicians like Rosa Luxemburg or Clara Zetkin did not change these everyday practices at the time.

Fighting Taylorism with its Own Weapons

Richard Müller first made a national name for himself in 1911 when he published a two-part article in the *Deutsche Metallarbeiter-Zeitung* (the German Metalworkers Newspaper, the newspaper of the German metalworkers union, the DMV) analysing what the new calculation methods that employers had introduced for pricing piecework on lathes implied for work and union organising. It indicates a well-developed, indeed combative, class consciousness. The new calculation methods would, he argued, make it easier for employers to control the workflow. As Taylorist practices – based on Fredrick Winslow Taylor's 'scientific management' – began to be introduced, the production process was divided into as many operations as possible, each with its own piece-work rates. Control over the work process and its pace passed from workers to the employer. While the employer had previously been dependent on the skilled workers' knowledge of their craft and had to concede a certain degree of autonomy to them, he now had an unprecedented degree of shop-floor control. Piecework also decreased wages and made it easier to replace skilled lathe operators with untrained labour. These new practices also led to high job turnover in this now devalued line of work because the new piecework rates, pushed down to the lowest possible level, resulted in sub-normal wages and the work became unbearably monotonous. High turnover made union organising even more difficult, further tilting the balance of power in favour of employers. But above all, the increased pace of work meant increased stress for workers.

No wonder then that Müller described the new methods as 'nothing more than a *sophisticated form of speed-up*'. He went on to say that, 'the slave driver no longer needs to stand directly behind the lathe operator. Now he sits comfortably in the costing office, sets arbitrary rates, and forces the workers into *maddeningly fast labour* or to perpetually change jobs'.¹⁵ Striking at the heart of Taylorism, Müller attacked the new calculation methods as unscientific and arbitrary and demanded equal participation for lathe operators in determining how the work was organised. He also proposed that the metalworkers union, the DMV, establish special instruction courses to prepare its representatives

¹⁵ Emphasis in original, *Deutsche Metallarbeiter-Zeitung*, no. 43, October 28, 1911.

for negotiations with costing offices: ‘What use would conquering the right to co-determination through great struggle be if we were then not in a position to find the right rate to take into negotiations with costing officials?’ He also knew from experience that the Taylorist reckoners ‘simply fold and wither away when they are confronted with actual calculations’.¹⁶

Müller’s article, itself a document in the history of Taylorism, shows the extent to which, on the eve of the Taylorist revolution on the shop floor, skilled workers’ economic power depended on their immediate control of work. If an employer succeeded in imposing Taylorist techniques, and thus in controlling work more intrusively, workers’ knowledge, and workers themselves would be devalued and rendered replaceable, also threatening their ability to strike and to assert themselves. It also showed, that, for all its vaunted scientific character, intricate Taylorist control over work was not easy to impose. Müller reported on cases where the original calculations were so imprecise that ultimately piecework rates of five, six, or in one case nine times higher had to be paid. This was recognised only after long-established qualified workers had left their employer and the lathing shop’s productivity had fallen as a result. Such imprecision did, of course, serve its function by extorting a faster pace from workers.

Müller’s article also shows, however, that while union representatives were involved in the minutiae of the shop floor and keenly mindful of the balance of power between workers and employers, their demands did not go beyond co-determination of work and working conditions and fair wages (or ‘correct’ piecework rates). The system was politically and economically stable and workers were compelled to improve the situation *within* the existing relations. Such day-to-day union practice and long-term socialist goals coexisted in union members’ consciousness – Richard Müller was no exception.

Bureaucracy in the Service of Agitation

This comes through particularly clearly in Müller’s 1913 pamphlet, *Über die Agitation in der Dreherbranche* (On Agitation in the Lathing Trade).¹⁷ It was published by the Iron, Metal, and Turret Lathe Operators’ Agitation Committee of the DMV’s Berlin Administrative Office, which Müller was managing by that time. The pamphlet was primarily a report on the committee’s tasks, organisational structures, and experiences in the workshops of Berlin.

¹⁶ *Metallarbeiter-Zeitung*, no. 43 and 44, October 28 and November 4, 1911; see also Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 288–90.

¹⁷ Müller 1913.

In this pamphlet, Müller emerges as a typical unionist of his time. In the preface, he laments the workers' lack of preparedness for action and defines the union's job as training all its members to be 'fighters for socialism'. To that end, he recommends an ingenious bureaucratic monitoring system made up of six different forms, which, if scrupulously filled out, could ensure that union members continually participated in the union. This may have seemed strange even to many of his contemporaries, but Müller defended his methods: 'If these arrangements appear to be somewhat awkward and laborious, they are nonetheless systematic and have the advantage of being thorough'.¹⁸

This juxtaposition of revolutionary rhetoric and ploddingly bureaucratic practice was common in German unions of the era. Even in the well-organised metal industry, the political consciousness of the working class was in no way a spontaneous and automatic outgrowth of class conflict. Instead, Müller noted a general lack of interest 'that has a paralyzing effect on all actions'.¹⁹ In practice, unions had to undertake persistent shop-floor work to make employers' infringements of workers' rights a front in the class struggle. They had to work out collective practices, like refusal of overtime or slow-downs, gradually and painstakingly.²⁰ They also had to constantly work to prevent young and over-eager workers, lured by employers' bonuses, from engaging in overtime, speeding up the pace of work, and pushing performance levels to heights that were unattainable by the majority of workers.

According to the Agitation Committee's report, attaining the stable solidarity necessary for political action beyond momentary protests was a drawn-out process that was rooted in shop-floor processes. Progress was constantly thwarted by the business owners' efforts to split the workforce by punishing some and rewarding others in order to insidiously raise the production rate while lowering the wage level and destroying solidarity.

Little wonder then, that unions focused on creating this elementary economic solidarity and on increasing their level of organisation by expanding the network of representatives within each workshop. This was what Richard Müller and the Agitation Committee actually did. Because the employers were able to divide the workers in their small day-to-day struggles within the factory, even small victories there, to say nothing of broader revolution, understandably appeared remote.

Once the lathe operators' section of the German Metalworkers Union, the DMV, was established in 1904, the Agitation Committee within its Berlin branch

¹⁸ Müller 1915, p. 51.

¹⁹ Müller 1913, p. 1.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

was at the forefront of the attempt to win over unorganised workers and to create a unionised core in workshops where collective resistance scarcely existed. Once this was substantially accomplished, the focus shifted to ensuring that ‘the organised masses not merely preserve the organisation but increasingly understand the ideas of the organisation, that they do not remain mere dues-paying members but become class-conscious fighters’, as Müller phrased it in another pamphlet in 1915. By that time almost 90 percent of Berlin’s lathe operators were organised.²¹

Müller’s participatory administrative system served to institutionalise the continuity of the struggle and to make it independent of individual variations in political consciousness. The bureaucratic approach, it had to be conceded, had ‘the benefit of being thorough’. Müller pursued his work with scientific precision. With his data collection, he was able to create precise statistics on workflows, equipment, wage trends, and the degree of union organisation in Berlin’s lathing industry. Such data were necessary to gain the advantage in negotiations with employers’ costing offices and to counter wage reductions disguised as ‘technical reforms’. Müller also studied Taylor’s own writings and those of other economic experts of his time. Replicating their thoroughness and ‘scientific approach’ in the cause of workers, Müller must have appeared to those facing him at the negotiating table as an equal if not superior despite his lack of formal education.²²

This thoroughness and systematic approach would serve him well later when he analysed the German Revolution as a historian. While Marx replaced Taylor in his preparatory reading for this analysis, Müller’s style as a historian was to refrain from abstract theorising and rely on his extensive political experience. While his accomplishments as an autodidact were astounding, it was his methodical precision and above all his understanding of workers’ thinking, culture and everyday life that provided him with insights that eluded others.

Richard Müller’s professionalisation of union work was necessary and successful but, ironically, it contributed to the very bureaucratisation and fetishisation of organisational detail in the labour unions of imperial Germany that Müller would later vehemently fight against. After the German Revolution, Müller would reflect that while bureaucratism had been a ‘historical necessity’ for unions under capitalism until then, it needed to be overcome in the new phase of the struggle.²³ However, in the pre-war era, he appeared to

²¹ Müller 1915, pp. 8 and 47.

²² See Müller 1915, pp. 66ff.

²³ See *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des 1. Reichskongresses der Betriebsräte Deutschlands*.

Abgehalten vom 5.–7. Oktober 1920 zu Berlin (Minutes of the Negotiations of the First

have identified more or less completely with it. If he saw any contradiction between socialism and bureaucracy he did not discuss it during this period. Nor was there, at first at least, any reason for doubt: his work in the Agitation Committee proved its worth and in 1914 he advanced to become the head of the lathe operators' section within the Berlin branch of the DMV. He was now responsible for all union labour performed by that category of workers in Berlin, some 8,500 union workers.²⁴

Despite this heavy responsibility, Müller's role was still that of a mid-level functionary. He worked on a voluntary basis and was unknown outside his section. And he was only an ordinary member of the other wing of the labour movement, the Social Democratic Party (SPD). He did not actively participate in the famous factional disputes over revisionism in the SPD; he knew personalities like Eduard Bernstein and Rosa Luxemburg only from the newspapers. That would change abruptly in the summer of 1914: the onset of the First World War did not mark a turning point for the SPD alone. The ensuing shock-waves spread to factories and families, dragging millions of simple workers and their unions into the political conflicts that until then had almost exclusively involved members of parliament and party intellectuals.

National Congress of German Works Councils: Held in Berlin from October 5–7, 1920), Berlin 1920, p. 233

²⁴ This figure refers to the numbers for 1913. See Müller 1915, p. 45.

CHAPTER 3

Opposition to the Burgfrieden: 1914–18

The Great War divided the international labour movement in ways that were neither foreseen nor straightforward. Workers had to choose between preserving the strength of the organisations that they had laboriously built over generations and the slow realisation that this very strength was being abused to legitimise a global massacre. These difficulties were further compounded by massive war propaganda: as Müller's example shows below, even a socialist worker had to struggle to emancipate himself from it. And under wartime censorship, propaganda was the only 'information' available. Splitting with their organisations did not even occur to workers who had been sceptical of or opposed to the war from the beginning: they continued to believe that only collective action would give them strength, including the strength to oppose the war – after all, that was what the labour movement had always been about. So organised workers did not leave the labour movement so much as begin to build opposition networks within it. This chapter tells the story of those that Richard Müller and his comrades in the DMV metal workers' union built during the *Burgfrieden*, the political truce between the social democrats and the government that subordinated the German labour movement to the 'national interests' of the Reich when war broke out.¹

"The Great Betrayal"

The onset of the World War did not come as a surprise to the European labour movement. By the time Otto von Bismarck left office in 1890, the system of European alliances that the famous chancellor had so carefully devised was starting to crumble. Since the German Reich was established in 1871, Bismarck had used artful diplomacy to smooth over foreign policy conflicts between the established industrial powers, England and France, and the rapidly developing upstart Germany. He had always pursued balance between the powers to

¹ 'Burgfrieden' – literally 'peace inside the castle', a metaphor in which the German nation was described as a medieval stronghold under siege, in which all inhabitants needed to cooperate against the enemy. References to the middle ages were typical for German propaganda during the First World War.

prevent the destruction of his handiwork by the British, French, or Russian empires.²

The collapse of the Bismarckian system is often traced to the blustery, sometimes decidedly undiplomatic foreign policy of the young Kaiser Wilhelm II who, unlike his predecessor, did not delegate state affairs to a strong chancellor but took charge of them personally. In fact, the crisis had deeper roots than that: it could be traced to the decline of British-dominated free-trade capitalism, which had lost ground to a new structure of self-contained, competing power blocs.³ While these blocs initially competed for their share of the globe through diplomatic means and without resorting to war among themselves, as in the Berlin Conference of 1884, relations became increasingly tense around the turn of the century. The First Moroccan Crisis of 1905–6, the Second Moroccan Crisis of 1911, German support for Austria's annexations in the Russian-dominated Balkans, as well as the controversy around the Baghdad Railway were all expressions of an expansionist Germany that was not averse to confrontation, something that the other imperial powers could scarcely tolerate. Germany was beginning to weigh on their spheres of influence and their markets.

The European labour movement understood this situation and said continually that it would not tolerate a world war. SPD founders Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel had vehemently opposed the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1 and Bebel, who was the head of the SPD until he died in 1913, established an anti-war stance as a constant in Social Democratic foreign policy. This approach was accepted internationally as well. The congress of the Second International in Basel in 1912 had signalled opposition to the looming war and urged international proletarian solidarity to counter it. As late as July 1914, the SPD's main organ, *Vorwärts*, published an inflammatory lead article on its front page that ended with the appeal, 'We don't want war! Down with war! Long live the international brotherhood of nations!'⁴

Almost all of Europe's socialist parties reversed course in August 1914, however, and supported their respective countries' entry into the war – each seeing it as a war of self-defence. In Germany, the constitutional monarchy was defending itself against Russian autocracy; in France, the Republic was defending itself against German reaction. Everyone was defending his homeland

² For more on the German Empire's foreign policy, see Ullrich 1997, 223–63 as well Rosenberg 1991a, especially Chapter 1.

³ See Arrighi 1994.

⁴ *Vorwärts*, July 25, 1914.

against invaders. Among the larger parties, only Britain's Independent Labour Party and Italy's socialists refused to support the drive to war.⁵ It looked as though no enduring commitments lay behind European working-class parties' glowing rhetoric of peace. Their conferences and pronouncements in favour of peace had great symbolic effect, but they produced no concrete arrangements for opposition once a war had started. Not only did the labour movement underestimate the integration mechanisms of the political and economic systems, it failed to even recognise them. The strength of its organisational apparatus, its print media, the unions' accident and pension funds, and other support systems, were correctly regarded as social investments, but it was the fear of losing these very investments through radical opposition to the state that repeatedly disciplined the working class even before 1914.⁶

In the summer of 1914, the extent to which most labour parties had already been integrated into the political and economic systems of their respective countries became apparent despite their clamorous opposition to those systems. The war and the public reversals by most party and union leaders made this clear on an ideological level – the politics of class struggle was abandoned and the social demands of the labour movement were justified and redefined as contributions to a national interest leading to the greater good of all within the framework of class collaboration. While these tendencies could indeed be traced to the 1890s, no one could have predicted back then that they would eventually lead to Social Democratic parliamentary votes for war credits. That came as a shock.

In Germany, the Social Democrats in the *Reichstag*, the largely toothless parliament of the German Reich, approved a wartime line of credit on 4 August 1914.⁷ Not a single Social Democrat voted against it; even Karl Liebknecht, well-known for his writings on anti-militarism, submitted to caucus discipline. Moreover, the SPD pushed Hugo Haase, its vice chairman and a determined opponent of the war, into the role of spokesman for the new policy, culminating with his reading of a patriotic statement justifying the party line on war credits. At that point, even (indeed especially) the left was bound by its commitment to unconditional organisational unity in intra-party conflicts.⁸ Writing in exile after Hitler's seizure of power, Philipp Scheidemann, who in

5 Abendroth 1965, p. 81.

6 See Ullrich 1997, p. 446 as well as Müller 1924a, p. 94 and pp. 72–7.

7 The Reichstag had very limited influence. It controlled the budget, but the chancellor and his cabinet were named by the emperor without any parliamentary influence.

8 See Laschitsa 2007, p. 237.

1914 was in the party's pro-war majority and would later head the Weimar government, also came to see the darker side of such party discipline: 'The absolute discipline of the SPD, celebrated as the most blessed sacrament of the party, is nearly impossible to understand today. The party organisation, which increasingly became an end unto itself rather than a means to an end, used this incredible discipline often; politically, it may be precisely this discipline that destroyed it'.⁹

Preparations for the labour movement's turn to war had been made over the previous days. At a conference on 1 and 2 August, the chairmen of the major trade unions decided, on the basis of prior negotiations with the Ministry of the Interior, to call off all ongoing strikes and not to initiate any new labour actions for the duration of the war. With the unions' close affiliation to the SPD, this decision effectively inaugurated the *Burgfrieden*, the political truce that subordinated the German labour movement to the interest of the imperial state.¹⁰

From Discipline to Opposition

But the party discipline that had been strong enough to deliver the required votes on 4 August could not stand up to the tensions war created. Opposition soon arose. On 2 December 1914, Karl Liebknecht became the first Social Democratic member of parliament to vote against a new war bond programme, and turned overnight into an icon of the opposition.¹¹ Other parliamentarians followed suit and soon two distinct oppositional currents emerged: a moderate one around Hugo Haase and Georg Ledebour and a more radical one around Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, which would later become the Spartacus group.¹² The two currents would soon come together in the Independent Social Democratic Party (the Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, the USPD), the platform for all socialists who opposed the

⁹ Scheidemann 2002, p. 92.

¹⁰ Limmer 1986, p. 41; Müller 1924a, p. 75.

¹¹ The Reichstag delegate, Fritz Kunert from Halle, also refused to support the credit line, but through passive resistance. Friedel Gräf, also active in the anti-war opposition, wrote in her memoirs that Comrade Kunert 'did not attend the session at all. Instead, he remained in the Reichstag lavatory the entire time'. BArch SAPMO, SG Y 30/0297, p. 30. For more on Karl Liebknecht, see Laschitza 2007.

¹² On the Spartacists, see William Pelz 1987. For more on the interactions between the two currents, see Luban 2008b, pp. 69–75.

war. Some of the editorial staff at *Vorwärts*, the SPD newspaper, particularly the editor, Ernst Däumig, did not support the party leaders' war policy either and more or less openly criticised the party's direction.¹³ This soon created tension and led to a public conflict between the editors and the General Committee of Trade Unions (Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften), the central leadership committee of the Social Democratic union movement from 1890 to 1919.¹⁴ This was another signal to the many workers who did not trust the party's sudden closeness to the class enemy and were looking for a new political orientation. But this orientation and reorganisation took time, time that was used by the state and Social Democratic apparatuses to strengthen their position. Ernst Däumig lost his position at *Vorwärts* in 1916 due to an intervention of the SPD leadership.

Opposition was stirring not only in the party, but in the unions too. Some of the rank and file had opposed the new pro-war direction from the beginning. At the first local Berlin DMV administrators' meeting after the war began, Richard Müller, in his capacity as section leader of the Berlin lathe operators, declared that his constituency would not participate in the *Burgfrieden*.¹⁵ Certainly it was the lathe operators' central position in the production process that permitted such direct opposition to the union leaders' pro-war stance at a time when most other union members were still submitting to the *Burgfrieden*. But such opposition was rife in the rank and file as well. While Wolfgang Abendroth, probably the foremost historian of German social democracy, believed that the rank and file of the SPD and unions was caught up in the pro-war enthusiasm thanks to the training of an authoritarian state, Arno Klönne attributes the appearance of such enthusiasm to a 'German Social Democratic patriotism' that had existed since the 1890s. By contrast, Richard Müller noted that there was no nationalist euphoria but rather that the 'mass of workers and representatives' were 'very reservedly' opposed to the pro-war mood in the rest of German society.¹⁶ New research on the First World War tends to confirm Müller's position. The German working class in 1914 did not oppose the war

¹³ For more on Däumig see Morgan 1983 as well as Naumann 1986.

¹⁴ Each separate union sent delegates to the General Committee, which was responsible for the general political line. The General Committee was replaced by the Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (General Federation of German Trade Unions) (ADGB) in 1919.

¹⁵ Müller 1924a, p. 94.

¹⁶ Erwin Winkler agrees with this assessment in his dissertation on the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, Winkler 1964, p. 97. See also Abendroth 1985, p. 145; Klönne 1989, p. 138; Müller 1924a, p. 70.

with enthusiasm, but they did not cheer it either. Especially the skilled workers were in a position to develop their own opinion. As Müller pointed out, the Berlin lathe operators

were a group that was organisationally firm and indispensable to production. In a way, they represented the heart of heavy industry. The companies paid them better and they worked under better conditions than other sections. This group rebelled entirely against the companies' war provisions [including an effective wage freeze], demanded higher wages, and got them... But the lathe operators not only protected their own interests. They also supported other weaker groups, particularly female workers, in disagreements with their companies.¹⁷

A report by the lathe operators' agitation committee further clarified the matter: 'If the lathing shops shut down, all production has to shut down immediately as a result'.¹⁸ Lathing shops were central to arms production; its operators, with their training of many years, could not be replaced. When the lathe operators resisted the wage freeze that resulted inevitably from the ban on strikes, their demands were quite soon met.

Müller, however, was deeply uncomfortable with the rift the lathe operators' position created within the DMV: it was unprecedented and went against his deepest convictions. Even ten years later, in his book *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik*, he emphasised the danger of divisive tendencies that could emerge from a 'slackening of discipline' within the union.¹⁹ Despite his staunch opposition to the policies of the union leadership, Müller remained opposed to any division in the labour movement throughout his political career and pleaded against any split and for political struggle within the existing structure of the union movement. Though Müller did eventually become involved with a leftist splinter union, the Deutscher Industrie-Verband (DIV), around 1928, even there he expressed the view that a change of course by the large unions was a necessary precondition for a social revolution. Moreover, Müller identified far more strongly with the union movement than with the political parties that he was active in. He changed parties twice in his life, moving from the SPD to the

¹⁷ Müller 1924a, p. 94. Due to the massive conscription of workers for frontline combat, the number of female factory workers increased enormously after the war started. For more on the lathe operators' role in the production process, see Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 288–90.

¹⁸ Müller 1915, p. 61.

¹⁹ Müller 1924a, p. 94.

USPD and later to the KPD (the Communist Party of Germany), but abandoned his membership in the mainstream of the union movement only when he was expelled from the metalworkers union in the early 1920s because of his communist views.²⁰

For all his commitment to movement unity, however, Müller did not shy away from engaging in vehement arguments with the local Berlin DMV administrators, rejecting the *Burgfrieden*, and initiating wildcat strikes from 1914 onwards. In the beginning the strikes were limited to wage demands and not aimed at generally sabotaging the war machine, as they later would be. Nonetheless, as the Shop Steward Paul Blumenthal later put it, ‘in a state of siege and under the *Burgfrieden*, every wage action became a political action’.²¹ The local DMV administration was nearly powerless to do anything against the strikes. Ultimately, according to Müller, ‘the local administration was happy just being informed about what was happening on the job sites’.²²

The collective nature of the lathe operators’ refusal was significant. Their opposition could not be considered a matter of individual conscience as in the cases of Liebknecht or Däumig. Only direct support from the rank and file in the workplace could have made Richard Müller’s actions possible. Therefore, though Müller himself ascribed considerable symbolic significance to the two opposition groups in the Reichstag, their political influence was limited. Despite their considerable prestige, they lacked direct contact with rank-and-file workers necessary for mass actions or strikes.²³

The union membership increasingly organised itself while its leaders looked on. As the war progressed, Richard Müller and the lathe operators’

²⁰ In a letter to the KPD leadership written on 21 February 1924 and later forwarded to the Comintern, Müller stated that he was expelled from the DMV because he campaigned to affiliate the DMV with the Moscow-oriented Red International of Labour Unions (RILU). He did not, however, give an exact date for his expulsion. See: *Begründung der Beschwerde an das Exekutivkomitee der K.I.*, in: Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343, page 15.

²¹ Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957, p. 31. Several oral history records of Shop Stewards were collected in the 1950s in East Germany and published in the volume called *Berlin 1917–1918 – Parteveteranen berichten über die Auswirkungen der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution auf die Berliner Arbeiterbewegung*. Another volume was edited by the Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB (a ‘veterans circle’ at the East German Union Federation), bearing the title *1918 – Erinnerungen von Veteranen der deutschen Gewerkschaftsbewegung*.

²² Müller 1924a, p. 94.

²³ Müller 1924a, p. 97. On the differences between the Spartacists and Haase and Ledebour’s parliamentary opposition, see also Müller 1924a, pp. 109–12.

union representatives, who assumed the name Revolutionary Shop Stewards in 1918 and had been establishing contacts across Germany since 1917, created a dense oppositional network rooted in Berlin's large companies.²⁴ At the time, Müller worked in the AEG turbine plant in Berlin's Moabit neighbourhood and had close contacts in the neighbouring companies, Ludwig Loewe AG and Deutsche Waffen und Munitionsfabrik (DWM, German Weapons and Munitions Factory) in Charlottenburg.²⁵

The general public's growing dissatisfaction with the continually diminishing food supply, which rapidly dampened such national fervour as had existed in 1914, provided an opening for targeted networking among oppositional workers. Strikes became more frequent not only among the lathe operators but more widely and the *Burgfrieden* was cast into doubt. Although the strikes dropped off after an initial uptick with the introduction of a new institution called 'war committees' (*Kriegsauschüsse*) in some industries, in which business owners, union leaders, and the government jointly negotiated social issues, the enormous increase in the cost of food in mid-1915 sparked new spontaneous walkouts and a loss of trust in the war committees.²⁶

Spurred by these symptoms of discontent, oppositionist union members worked on developing their networks. This had to be done in secret because, despite the *Burgfrieden*, official union assemblies were subject to police surveillance. So Berlin lathe operators used informal conversations at union assemblies to make contact or organised parties and festivals for workers in their trade as cover. Paul Blumenthal, who was head of the welders' section of the DWM as well as a co-founder of the Shop Stewards, stated in a later interview with an East German historian that,

The union conferences discussed union questions. But comrades opposed to the war soon recognised each other and we came together over beer afterwards. By pooling our experiences, we enriched each other mutually

²⁴ Paul Blumenthal writes that the actual 'body of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards' was formed after 1 May 1916. See Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957, p. 31. See also Müller 1924a.

²⁵ Paul Geisler oral history interview in: Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB 1960, p. 582. The buildings of another DWM location on Eichborndamm in Berlin's Wittenau neighbourhood have survived to the present day. The Landesarchiv Berlin is located there now.

²⁶ Winkler 1964, pp. 130ff; Müller 1924a, p. 95.

and that was, one could say, the real beginning of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards in Greater Berlin.²⁷

So the Shop Stewards' network started under the guise of a group of drinking buddies.

Given that each Shop Steward represented an entire job site or plant where he²⁸ in turn had trusted representatives in various departments and shops within it, the Shop Stewards were able to reach thousands of workers in large companies despite their own relatively small membership.²⁹ Jakob Walcher, who collaborated with the Shop Stewards during this period, described the group's operating method:

almost every one of the people who were included in the Revolutionary Shop Stewards' organisation had the absolute trust of other union representatives on their job sites and very often of the officials in their section of the union ... So in the big companies, these higher officials often influenced dozens of other ... representatives and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards' calls to action ... reached hundreds and hundreds of workplace representatives and entire workforces were contacted through them and they followed.³⁰

²⁷ Paul Eckert oral history interview file, BArch SAPMO, SG Y 30/0180, p. 5; Paul Blumenthal oral history interview file, BArch SAPMO, SG Y 30/0079, p. 10.

²⁸ Shop Stewards are identified here as 'he' because there were then no female Shop Stewards. The Revolutionary Shop Stewards were, like all labour movement organisations at the time, all male, though they represented many female workers and led them in strikes. In January 1918, however, Cläre Casper was elected the first woman in the Berlin strike leadership; she was later accepted as an equal member of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards' inner circle. For more on this, see Cläre Casper oral history interview, BArch SAPMO, SGY 30/0148, p. 4, p. 15. Louise Zietz also worked with the Shop Stewards as a liaison with the central leadership of the USPD. For more on this, see Grebing 1994.

²⁹ Small businesses were explicitly excluded from the network. Only large workplaces with over 1,000 employees were allowed to send representatives to the Revolutionary Shop Stewards. See statements by Heinrich Malzahn in the minutes of a session of the USPD workers' councils in January 1919 in Berlin, SAPMO-BArch, RY 19/II/143/2, p. 30. The actual membership of the Shop Stewards' network remains unknown. In 1924, Müller himself estimated that there had been 'more than 1, 000', but he must have been referring to the entire network, not the inner circle that actually led the organisation. See: *Begründung der Beschwerde an das Exekutivkomitee der K.I.*, in: Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343; page 18.

³⁰ *Die Vereinigung der revolutionären Obleute*, estate of Jacob Walcher, SAPMO-BArch, NY/4087/12.

Unlike the USPD and the Spartacists, the Shop Stewards' structure did not make them

a mass organisation that anyone could join but rather a selective group of people who had a certain training and experience in day-to-day political and union struggle and necessarily had influence among the workers on the job. They were a 'proletarian vanguard' in the true sense of the term.³¹

But Müller was not describing an authoritarian vanguard. Müller himself, and the Shop Stewards in general, consistently refused to initiate actions against the will of the majority of the working class, acting only when they knew that the workers were behind them at the risk of giving the impression of timidity or indecisiveness. The Shop Stewards' representative system was not based on a vanguard theory but on the localist syndicalist tradition among Berlin's metalworkers. During the era of the anti-socialist laws (*Sozialistengesetze*, 1878–90), which prohibited all union activities, they had organised themselves primarily through an informal system of representation by profession; they did not join the DMV until 1897. For that reason, Berlin metalworkers had the privilege of local strike autonomy within the union until 1907.³² By the time the war broke out, these structures had become integrated into the more bureaucratic DMV – a process in which Richard Müller had played an essential role through his work as a section leader and a member of the agitation committee.³³ This integration served to concentrate the power of the metalworkers further. Representative structures were professionalised and strike funds were centralised. These measures added to their fighting power as a union but at the expense of taking the initiative away from the rank and file and giving it to full-time local administrators. The membership accepted this new dispensation at first, but increasingly attacked it after the war started.

Having initially supported this trend toward increasing bureaucracy and centralisation, Richard Müller now led the counter-tendency. He worked to reform the DMV's official committees in addition to organising the Shop Stewards in a clandestine parallel structure.³⁴ In September 1915, he proposed a change to the union's charter. Müller demanded that the rank-and-file

³¹ Müller 1924a, pp. 161f.

³² Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 198ff.

³³ Ibid., pp. 270ff. for the representatives' individual tasks and everyday activities within the DMV.

³⁴ Most but not all of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards were also official union representatives within the DMV representative system. See Dirk H. Müller 1985a, p. 318.

sections, such as his Berlin lathe workers section, should be granted greater rights to choose representatives for the executive board of the unions' local administration. This would have made the executive board and the local administration responsible to the sections and therefore, ultimately, to the workplace, so that more of the rank and file would participate effectively in union matters. While the local administration was run by full-time union officials, the section organisers, such as Richard Müller, were volunteers, earning their wage in the factories without payment from the unions. It was this middle-level between rank-and-file and paid organisers where the anti-war opposition concentrated.³⁵ Despite the fact that a thirteen-member reform committee met a total of seventeen times in nine months, all of Müller's proposals were rejected by the union leadership. Only a few modifications in the unions' internal information channels were achieved.³⁶

It is, in any case, doubtful whether the proposals would have genuinely democratised the union. Although the anti-war faction had gained ground, Müller's proposals of September 1915 remained rather formal. They were far removed from his later ideas of council democracy. Despite opposition to the war and the *Burgfrieden*, in 1915 Müller and his circle had not yet developed a political form or social utopia that was substantially different from that of the Social Democrats' left wing. While they opposed the ban on strikes and the *Burgfrieden*, they had not yet developed an extensive critique of union or SPD policies. There would be no effective break with those forms until what was known as the Liebknecht Strike in June 1916, the first political mass strike organised by the Stewards, though the group would not take the name 'Revolutionary Shop Stewards' until 1918.

Early Ambiguities and their Price

The oppositional groups' political ambiguity prior to mid-1916 was amply evident in Müller's refusal to mix union politics with politics more broadly or to even discuss urgent political issues at a lathe operators' section conference in April 1915. Instead, he stated categorically that 'We do not want to nor can we

³⁵ Ibid. p. 288. A later memoir also indicates that almost all the section leaders in the DMV supported the left wing. See *Protokoll einer Aussprache mit rev. Obleuten*, LArch Berlin, C Rep 902-02-04, no. 199.

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 278–284. Dirk H. Müller calls the reform proposals an 'organizational reflex' in reaction to the controversy over the *Burgfrieden* policy: Dirk H. Müller 1985a, p. 286.

discuss what happens outside. That is a political matter'.³⁷ Müller was uncritically reflecting the then-common division of labour between the unions, representing the labour movement's economic wing, and the Social Democrats, representing its political wing. Though he claimed to have opposed the war from the start, his opposition was initially aimed only at the *Burgfrieden* and the ban on strikes. It was not until the onset of the mass strikes that the Shop Stewards were radicalised and began attacking the war itself rather than its isolated consequences.³⁸

Müller's talk at the section conference in 1915 was printed in a pamphlet documenting the work of the lathe operators' Agitation Committee in 1914/1915.³⁹ Union wage issues conspicuously dominated and he only mentioned the war with regard to its impact on the economy, labour organising, and the wage structure in the lathing industry. Reading between the lines, it is clear that nine months into the World War, Müller still assumed that the conflict was a passing phase. Regarding business owners' threats, he wrote, 'I do not want to discuss this here. As soon as the present state of emergency is over, as soon as we are completely free to think again, I will come back to it'. On the one hand, censorship forced him to focus strictly on labour relations; on the other, he still appears to have hoped that the war would soon give way to a normal state of peace. He therefore deferred long-term political issues or at least kept them private. On the other hand, he had to note that, 'This war has disoriented many of our colleagues, clouding their clarity of thought and prompting opinions and views that no one would have thought possible before'.

Indeed, the war also showed Müller that, 'The roots of the modern labour movement are slack and frail among the masses'.⁴⁰ He was particularly shocked at how easily the long-standing internationalism of the labour movement had been abandoned in the summer of 1914. Although he would write ten years later that 'the bulk of the factory and office workers' were quite reserved about and even 'disgusted' with the 'tricked out euphoria of war',⁴¹ this 1915 pamphlet

³⁷ Müller 1915, p. 33.

³⁸ Müller's colleague, Emil Barth, made comments to this effect in 1919 in connection with the late 1918 dispute that they both took part in. Barth calls Müller apolitical and claims that Müller's only conviction was of the necessity of striking. Emil Barth: *Aus der Werkstatt der deutschen Revolution*, Berlin 1919, p. 13. For more on Müller's and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards' position in 1914/1915, see Winkler 1964 pp. 104ff.

³⁹ The title of the pamphlet was 'Richard Müller: Bericht der Agitationskommission der Eisen-, Metall- und Revolverdreher der Verwaltungsstelle Berlin des deutschen Metallarbeiter-Verbandes für das Geschäftsjahr 1914/1915'; referred to as Müller 1915.

⁴⁰ Müller 1915, p. 10, pp. 13f.

⁴¹ Müller 1924a, p. 70.

nonetheless conveys considerable self-doubt which might explain his political ambiguity. Müller's faith in his union comrades was shaken, at least for a while.

Perhaps Müller needed more time to adjust to the new situation. Certainly the pamphlet, rather than opposing the war, seemed to focus on Müller's pre-war preoccupations with preserving the representative system within the unions and continuing the struggle against Taylorist reorganisation. Müller's attention was on overstaffing in the industry and the foreseeable surplus of labour when the war ended. He even attempted to prepare his new semi-skilled colleagues for a change of employment. The war would, of course, soon present the opposite problem.

The distance Müller still had to travel from the ambiguities of the early war years to the revolutionary convictions that came later was evident in another confrontation between the Shop Stewards and the DMV leadership a few months later. In March 1916, Adolf Cohen, Chairman of the union's local administration, was up for re-election in the DMV's Berlin general assembly. Contrary to standard procedures, Richard Müller forced a substantive discussion of war policy and the ban on strikes. The discussion was heated and required two more meetings, but Müller emerged as the clear winner when the assembly adopted his resolution against the *Burgfrieden*. Afterwards, the representatives wanted to go a step further and remove Adolf Cohen in order to make Müller the chairman, but Müller declined. He personally endorsed Cohen's re-election. Adolf Cohen won with only a third of the votes while two thirds of the assembly abstained.

Müller would later call his decision a 'serious mistake', citing only 'conflicts with military authorities' that would inevitably follow if the union elected an anti-war chairman as a reason for not accepting the position.⁴² It is conceivable that he feared his own imprisonment as well as repression of the entire union if he, and the views with which he was now associated, rose to a leadership position. It is also likely that he still hoped that the Social Democratic and union leadership would change course. In an article published in June 1919, Müller reported that despite the incomprehensibility of the labour leaders' policies, he had 'always assumed that they were also eager to help the German people, the proletariat'.⁴³ He would not definitively lose faith in the union leadership until after the Revolution when he and the opposition successfully pushed for a re-election of the DMV's executive board. Müller's assertions in his pamphlets strongly suggest that he was induced to decline the union chairmanship by his indecision and ambivalence. Those feelings were certainly

⁴² Müller 1924a, pp. 91f.

⁴³ Richard Müller: 'Tua res agitur', *Die Republik*, dated June 6, 1919.

widely shared: while the Berlin opposition criticised the strike prohibition, it did not criticise weapons manufacturing until a resolution on this issue was passed in November 1916.⁴⁴ Contrary to Müller's own later account, therefore, it must be said that while there had been a strike movement and opposition to the *Burgfrieden* in Berlin as early as 1914, the Shop Stewards and the union opposition did not actually turn into a political anti-war movement until 1916. They became a revolutionary organisation much later, toward the end of 1917.

The opposition within the DMV would have to live with the results of the March 1916 general assembly for a long time. The military took advantage of Müller's retreat and, with Adolf Cohen's cooperation, prevented new elections within the Berlin DMV until the end of the war.⁴⁵ This would force the opposition to organise itself in parallel structures over the following few months. After this reorganisation its actions completely sidelined the union's official organs.

44 Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 305f.

45 Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 304f., Müller 1924a, pp. 126f. In September 1917, all of the DMV district conferences protested against the local DMV administrations' increasingly obvious collaboration with military authorities and finally demanded that they 'vacate their positions immediately'. The protest was disregarded. See Winkler 1964, p. 400.

CHAPTER 4

The Revolutionary Shop Stewards and Political Mass Strikes: 1916–18

After the ‘serious mistake’ of March 1916, Richard Müller and the dissenting metalworkers had no choice but to protest deteriorating working and living conditions in defiance of the strike ban and the union leadership that stood by it. In doing so, they began to change their course. Gradually, their initial political indecision was replaced with determined opposition to the war. They soon found, however, that their informal organisation within the metalworkers union was not enough for effective action: the union bureaucracy was able to outmanoeuvre them every time. This forced Müller and his opposition forces to reorganise themselves informally to express their opposition to the war in a series of escalating actions. Though in retrospect it is clear that they constituted the build-up to the German Revolution, the group was not aware of it at the time, did not see itself as revolutionary and only took the name the Revolutionary Shop Stewards in 1918. The alteration of the group’s political attitude was not an intellectual process, but a bread and butter issue: when food shortages began to affect even the skilled workers and their families, these increasingly radicalised workers found a new way to express their anger: the political mass strike. This chapter deals with the three mass strikes that the Stewards organised in June 1916, April 1917, and January 1918, each more powerful than the one before.

The Stewards’ First Political Strike: Protesting Liebknecht’s Arrest

The German labour movement had intensely debated the method of the political mass strike – distinguished from mass or general strikes by its political aims – in the wake of the historic political strikes that accompanied the brutally suppressed Russian Revolution of 1905. At the 1905 SPD conference in Jena, the executive board, the left wing around Rosa Luxemburg, and the revisionists around Eduard Bernstein all agreed that the mass strike should be used defensively against attacks on the labour movement as a whole, such as attempts to repeal the right to form unions, as well as offensively to achieve universal suffrage. At their Cologne conference just a few months earlier, however, union leaders refused to even consider the mass strike or any other mass action,

seeing them all as ‘absurd’, reprehensible and a distraction from their ‘day-to-day work to make labour organisations stronger’.¹ This made the party’s unanimous support for the mass strike essentially ceremonial. But when mass strikes became a reality ten years later, neither the party administrators nor the union committee were able to exert much influence on their development. The workers themselves had chosen them as their own method of struggle.

The first political mass strike of June 1916 is widely associated with Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg’s Spartacist group, founded in January of the same year.² However, while the dramatic arrest of Karl Liebknecht on May Day 1916, immediately after he condemned the war and the government before a massed meeting the Spartacists had called in Potsdamer Platz, provided the occasion, and while the Spartacists were indeed involved, the strike was in fact organised by the Revolutionary Shop Stewards. The two groups worked as allies, but not without tensions. They also had different spheres of mobilisation: while the Shop Stewards organised workers on the shop floor, the Spartacists wanted to take them to the streets.

Those who came to form the Spartacus Group had already been organising demonstrations against the war and this continued in 1916, though the response was muted. That changed on 1 May 1916 when several thousand people gathered on Potsdamer Platz after Karl Liebknecht issued a call that spread by word of mouth and improvised flyers. Liebknecht had been drafted into the army as a *Schipper*, a ‘work-soldier’ assigned to tasks such as digging trenches rather than combat duties, presumably because the government did not trust him with a weapon. Now he appeared before the crowds in Potsdamer Platz in his uniform and, before thousands of people, issued his legendary call, ‘Down with the war! Down with the government!’ The reaction was immediate: the police broke up the assembly violently, arrested Liebknecht on the spot and imprisoned him until October 1918, once again making him a symbol of the revolutionary peace movement.³

Now the Shop Stewards began to move to the front of the political opposition. On 27 June, some of them participated in a Spartacist demonstration

¹ Limmer 1986, p. 37; on Rosa Luxemburg’s role, see also Luban 2010.

² The group emerged out of a Berlin circle called ‘Gruppe Internationale’ (Group of the Internationale) that had formed soon after war broke out. It was organised by Liebknecht, Luxemburg and other left SPD intellectuals. It was reorganised as the Spartacus Group in 1916 to include a broader membership from other cities. During the Revolution, the group changed its name to ‘Spartakusbund’ and on 1 January 1919 became part of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD); see Pelz 1987.

³ See Laschitzka 2007, pp. 300ff.

against Liebknecht's impending trial the following morning. The trial was being held on short notice, leaving little time for organising political action. The Shop Stewards were nevertheless determined to try and arrange a meeting the evening after the demonstration.⁴ By the time leading Shop Stewards arrived at the *Musiker-Festsäle*, the Berlin dancehall they had rented for the meeting, however, it was clear that information about the meeting had leaked and that 'characters who had business written all over their faces', i.e., police informers, had found their way there.⁵ In the circumstances, the planned meeting could not be conducted. However, a small group of 30 people reassembled later in a pub on Sophienstrasse. There, on Richard Müller's proposal, the political mass strike was decided on for the next day. The Shop Stewards dispersed and, despite the entirely improvised planning, 55,000 workers went on strike in Berlin on 28 June for Liebknecht's freedom.

It started with Berlin's large companies – Borsig, AEG, Löwe, and Schwartzkopff – and grew from there. News that 'The lathe operators are striking for Liebknecht!' spread by word of mouth, activated other divisions in their respective companies, and led to a complete walkout on many job sites.⁶ The action turned a demonstration of state power into a show of strength for the anti-war movement and showcased the new opposition group's potential. Although the Shop Stewards were at first confined to the Berlin lathe operators employed in large companies, they were soon able to draw out enormous masses of workers from throughout the metal industry wherever their calls fit the mood of the workforce. There were even sympathy strikes in companies where the Shop Stewards had no representatives. The SPD and DMV leadership responded with harsh counterpropaganda in defence of the *Burgfrieden* in an article in *Vorwärts*, but when they sought to distribute anti-strike leaflets they had to face a practical demonstration of the limits of their authority. The local DMV head, Adolf Cohen, handed out the leaflets at a meeting of union representatives for distribution among the workers. However, following a protest speech by the Shop Steward, Paul Blumenthal, who had apparently been accidentally invited, those present refused the assignment and all 40,000 flyers were left behind.⁷

⁴ *Vorwärts*, 24 June 1916.

⁵ Müller 1924a, p. 101.

⁶ Müller 1924a, p. 102. The identification of the lathe operators as the trigger and the listing of the individual companies show the local character that the Shop Stewards still had. For a detailed list of the striking companies, see Winkler 1964, p. 212.

⁷ See Paul Blumenthal's report in Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957, p. 30.

Repression and the New Opposition

The ‘Liebknecht Strike’ did not achieve its goal, however. Karl Liebknecht was brought to trial, convicted and the Shop Stewards did not call for another strike during appeals or sentencing. This may have been because the state reacted harshly to the unexpected opposition. Striking workers and suspected leaders were drafted into the military by the dozen and sent to the front. Richard Müller was also temporarily drafted, but was discharged after three months.⁸

The threat of military service had a paralysing and intimidating effect on workers’ general willingness to participate in actions. Moreover, the union leadership and the SPD supported the state’s response and blamed the strike for cuts in wages and other setbacks caused by the war economy. This first mass strike certainly indicated that the working class’s uncritical loyalty to the party and the unions was seriously shaken, but it was not yet broken. Though the Spartacists, as usual ready for mass political action, urged them on, the Shop Stewards did not call for more actions because they found the mood in their working-class communities unreceptive. Richard Müller criticised the Spartacists’ actionism and their inability to understand the way that the working class thought. However, in his later writings Müller did not reveal that the Shop Stewards were also working with the Spartacists on concrete plans to carry out another strike in August 1916.⁹ But they fell through and the Shop Stewards did not participate. The Spartacists did go ahead and issue their call for a strike, but, without the Shop Stewards’ participation, it received little response.

There were no mass actions during Liebknecht’s trial. Nor was there widespread opposition when Rosa Luxemburg was arrested and held in ‘protective custody’ without charge until her release during the revolution in November 1918. For the moment, the repression had paralysed the factory workers’ fighting power.

For all that, however, the June strike had demonstrated the political potential of the working class. It marked a new phase in Müller’s and the Shop Stewards’ activities. They had emerged from their former confinement to wage and shop-floor struggles and were now engaging in large-scale politics self-consciously and with a new intensity. That powerful demonstration inspired the political opposition, which now developed its networks and worked towards new actions.

Something was happening in parliament as well. Members of the Reichstag thrown out of the SPD caucus for opposing the war and the *Burgfrieden*, and also

⁸ Müller 1924a, p. 104, footnote.

⁹ See Luban 2008a, Müller 1924a, p. 104.

the rank-and-file members who agreed with them, founded the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) in April 1917. It became an umbrella organisation for the opposition to the war and the *Burgfrieden* in all Germany.¹⁰ Members of the Spartacus League as well as the Shop Stewards joined the new party while retaining their organisational independence and their own strategic perspectives. Following Liebknecht's example, the Spartacists continued to hold demonstrations and maintained a street-level presence while the Shop Stewards continued their quiet shop-floor organisation.

Müller's Arrest and the April Strike

With their political antennae tuned to working-class sentiment, the Stewards acted only when they considered the mood ripe – and it was ripe for a second mass strike in April 1917, a week after the USPD's founding conference. Widespread hunger during the previous winter, which became known as the *Kohlribbenwinter*, the 'Rutabaga Winter', as well as new restrictions placed on workers' choice of employment by the *Vaterländische Hilfsdienstgesetz* (Auxiliary Service Law) had transformed the demoralisation following the first strike of June 1916 into a renewed fury. The law, presented in draft form on 22 November 1916, obligated all workers to perform 'patriotic emergency service' in the armament industry.¹¹ This meant that workers had lost their right to quit their job and were handed over to the business owners' caprice without protection. The General Committee of Trade Unions supported the law and, in exchange for their loyalty, the unions were now recognised as critical to the war effort and their officials exempted from military service.¹²

The rank and file had not agreed to any of this. On 26 November 1916, the Berlin general assembly of the DMV adopted a resolution introduced by Richard Müller fundamentally rejecting the *Hilfsdienstgesetz* as an 'emergency law for the workers' alone and opposing unions' proposals for modification because they constituted 'no guarantee that the interests of the workers will be safeguarded'. The worker committees under the new law would be no different from the 'war committees' that had already been introduced: they did not

¹⁰ For more on the development and history of the USPD, see Krause 1975, also Engelmann and Naumann 1993.

¹¹ An English translation of the law can be found at the website of the German Historical Institute, Washington DC: <http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=953> (accessed on 10.1.2013).

¹² Opel 1957, p. 57.

represent workers and would be of no use particularly if the right to strike was also going to be rescinded. The resolution ended by asking 'both social-democratic caucuses [of the SPD and the USPD] to reject the law'.¹³ In doing so, it expressly referred to the USPD members of the Reichstag as the true representatives of the Berlin metalworkers' interests.

For all that, Müller's resolution did not fundamentally criticise wartime production. Indeed, it even claimed that armament production could be 'increased considerably' with better working conditions. This claim showed that the Berlin opposition had not yet arrived at a decidedly anti-war policy.¹⁴ That resolution, however, was the last document of its kind. Starting in spring 1917, such ambiguity disappeared from the statements issued by Müller and his comrades.

Despite rank-and-file protest, the *Hilfsdienstgesetz* went into effect in December 1916 amid dramatically declining food supplies. That winter working-class outrage grew to an unprecedented level. A report to Berlin's chief of police dated 21 February 1917 observed 'a tense atmosphere among the workers and... continual attempts to gain better working conditions and wages'. During many of the assorted short strikes in individual workplaces, the report continued, 'workers clearly explained that their refusal to work was not directed at the management but at the government because it was not providing enough food for hardworking urban populations'.¹⁵

The discontent was also increasingly directed at the SPD and the General Committee of Trade Unions. When a reduction in food rations was announced on March 23, tensions boiled over. The union leadership recognised the gravity of the situation and convened a number of assemblies and conferences. Kaiser Wilhelm II even tried to calm the people personally, promising a decades-overdue electoral reform in Prussia and an end to the three-class franchise after the war ended. It did not work. The workers only became more restless. They would not easily tolerate a food shortage. Something had to happen.

The Shop Stewards had not been idle. They took advantage of the Berlin DMV's general assembly scheduled for 15 April and called for another mass strike, one that would challenge both the government and the union leadership. They targeted the general assembly because, on the one hand, the Shop

¹³ *Deutsche Metallarbeiter-Zeitung*, no. 50, December 9 1916, p. 206. See also Opel 1957, p. 57.

¹⁴ See Dirk H. Müller 1985a, p. 305; Winkler 1964, pp. 248ff.

¹⁵ Quoted in Scheel 1957, p. 4.

Stewards were a powerful force within the union and on the other hand the assembly represented all large metalworking companies in Berlin.¹⁶

These plans could not be kept secret from the imperial authorities. Richard Müller was arrested for a second time just two days before the general assembly and sent to a military camp in the town of Jüterbog for conscription into the military.¹⁷ Suspicion that the DMV leadership had informed on him was widespread among the workers; more recently, many historians have verified that union officials acted as informants against strikers, although the unions vehemently denied it at the time.¹⁸ Though his electoral retreat in the DMV in March 1916 might have spared him then, repression had finally caught up with Richard Müller. His leading role in sabotaging the *Burgfrieden* could no longer be disguised.

His adversary Adolf Cohen conducted the DMV assembly on 15 April, 1917. After Müller's arrest, Cohen wanted to prevent the strike or at least reduce it

¹⁶ The East German historian, Heinrich Scheel, misleadingly described the strike as an action that was called through Spartacist agitation while his colleague, Erwin Winkler, attempted to minimise the Shop Stewards' role and to depict Müller's activities at their head as hesitant. Both followed the paradigm of East German historiography on the German Revolution, according to which the Spartacus Group was leading the anti-war opposition. In fact Richard Müller warned against taking action three days before the strike, but he was not opposing the strike per se. He only warned against starting an uncoordinated strike without leadership. In a recent study, Ottokar Luban provides a more realistic view of the respective roles of the Spartacists and the Shop Stewards in the April strike when he limits the former's contribution primarily to leafleting and depicts the latter as its organisers and chief actors. See Winkler 1964, p. 297; Scheel 1957, p. 24; Luban 2008a, p. 7; as well as Müller 1924a, p. 119. Such politics of historical interpretation are discussed further in chapter 11.

¹⁷ The authorities had already recommended drafting labour's spokespersons by late February. See Scheel 1957, p. 5 and Müller 1924a, p. 120.

¹⁸ See the leaflet 'Wir sind verraten worden!' (We Have Been Betrayed!), April 1917, reproduced in Müller 1924a, pp. 121f. Peter von Oertzen provides evidence of social democratic unions collaborating with the police, citing the report of a 1916 hearing by the local military command, the Oberkommando in den Marken, in which a union leader states his willingness to provide the military with 'a list of other agitators', von Oertzen 1976, p. 63. Hans Joachim Bieber adds that in some cases requests exempting skilled workers from the draft were not forwarded by the union if the workers concerned were known to be oppositional: Bieber 1981, p. 512. It is also certain that a Berlin representative of the Hirsch-Duncker unions was an informant who had been telling the police about the strike preparations from early April 1917. Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 295f. Beyond these known incidents relating to the Berlin metal industry, however, it is still disputed whether there was a systemic collaboration between unions and police during the First World War.

to purely economic demands. His approach failed. When the delegates heard about the arrest, they immediately called for Müller's release and decided to strike to enforce their demand. His freedom became the first political demand of the April strike, precisely what Cohen had wanted to prevent. Well-versed in procedural tactics, however, he was able to ensure that the strike leadership was not under the general assembly's control but under that of a representative committee that he headed. He could now expect to control the proceedings.

The assembly had met on a Sunday and the strike took place in full force on the Monday immediately following. The two to three hundred thousand striking workers in Berlin's April 1917 'Bread Strike' surpassed the 1916 action by far. While in 1916, there were only strikes in Berlin and Braunschweig, in 1917, workers also struck in Halle, Magdeburg, and Leipzig. This deeper and wider response was made possible in part by secret agreements made at the USPD's founding conference which permitted greater mass anti-war strike coordination across different regions for the first time.¹⁹ The international situation also boosted strike activity. In Russia, the Tsar had been toppled by a revolution that started with a demonstration of angry female workers on International Women's Day on 8 March, 1917. The democratic provisional government that took power was supported by socialist worker's councils in Petrograd and Moscow. These events, named the 'February Revolution' because of the Julian calendar that was still being used in Russia at the time, emboldened workers in Germany.

Given that civilian government bodies had lost power to General Ludendorff and the army starting in 1916, Alfred Cohen negotiated on behalf of Berlin's striking workers directly with the highest regional military authority for Berlin and its surroundings, the *Oberkommando in den Marken*.²⁰ The *Oberkommando* promised to look into Müller's conscription once more and to increase food supplies. These assurances satisfied Cohen and he called an end to the strike after one day with the support of a slim majority in the representative committee.²¹

A large minority of Berlin workers, later estimated by Müller himself at about 50,000 people,²² continued striking nonetheless. In a novel move, these

¹⁹ Luban 2008a, p. 9.

²⁰ On the military dominance in domestic politics see Rosenberg 1991a, pp. 132ff. '*Oberkommando in den Marken*' refers to 'Mark Brandenburg', the region around Berlin.

²¹ See Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 298f.

²² Müller 1924a, p. 121.

holdouts elected a workers' council to represent them.²³ They also added new political demands to the original demand for Müller's release – for more food but also for a government commitment to peace without annexations, an end of the state of siege and censorship, the repeal of the *Hilfsdienstgesetz*, and universal equal voting rights with a secret ballot to replace the three class electoral system that made Prussia the bulwark of conservatism in Germany.²⁴ These demands had already been made by the more radical strikers in the neighbouring industrial centre of Leipzig, where the first workers' council had been established in April 1917. However, even this radicalism had its limits. Although the first workers' councils had appeared during the Bread Strike of April 1917, the strikers' demands did not yet include any socialist or council democratic demands. Their material demands were confined to food supplies and peace and their political demands did not go beyond universal suffrage.

The split that the union leadership had managed to create in the Berlin strike front ultimately caused the strike to disintegrate. Although USPD Reichstag delegates, Dittmann and Hoffmann, agitated in assemblies for its continuation, the action collapsed completely on 23 April.

Marking Time under Repression

Müller was not the only labour activist arrested and drafted into the military: the military *Oberkommando* for Berlin and the surrounding region applied the tactic of sending activists to the front more widely and company owners helped by providing names of disobedient workers. These activist draftees' documents were stamped with the word *Kohle* (coal) and ensured that officers and superiors

²³ Opel 1957, p. 60. The existence of a workers' council in Berlin spanning multiple workplaces is not entirely uncontested, but there were at least attempts in this direction. See Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 303ff. The first job-site workers' councils in Berlin were at Knorr-Bremse and Deutsche Waffen- und Munitionsfabrik (DWM) sites. See Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957, p. 47; Schneider and Kuda 1968, p. 19.

²⁴ These demands are documented in Müller 1924a, p. 122n. See also Opel 1957, pp. 60f. as well as Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 300ff. The electoral system in Prussia, largest state within the German Reich, dated from 1849 and included a three class franchise where voters' influence was dependent on the taxes they paid. Votes were not secret either, allowing authorities to put pressure on social democratic and liberal voters. A conservative majority in the Prussian parliament was the result, and since the Prussian government had a strong veto-power within the federal structure of the Reich, the three class franchise blocked political reform.

would treat them particularly harshly.²⁵ Richard Müller had to remain in the military until the end of June 1917, after which he was able to return to the labour movement. His case was most likely helped by an employer's claim that he was a skilled worker in a field critical to the war effort.²⁶

Although it ultimately disintegrated, the April strike was a decisive display of worker power. The enormous increase in the number of participants unnerved the *Oberkommando* and, in spite of the harsh repression, the workers' readiness to oppose the authorities grew over time.²⁷

War weariness was deepening in Germany. On 19 July 1917, even the once absolutely loyal Reichstag passed a peace resolution sponsored by the SPD and the Catholic Centre Party (Zentrumspartei). In calling for peace without annexations or indemnities, the resolution took on board a central point of the Leipzig strikers' demands. Nonetheless, when accepting the resolution, Chancellor Michaelis added a critical proviso – 'As I understand it' – which allowed the government to ignore the peace resolution in practice. The Reichstag was more powerless than ever – not only could it not depose the chancellor, who had always been accountable only to the emperor, but Wilhelm II had transferred policy decisions entirely to the military leadership in 1916.

The peace resolution, which some historians have seen as a move toward democracy, was actually inconsequential and purely symbolic.²⁸ It merely showed, once again, that the German parliament had no real say in politics before the 1918 November Revolution. It could neither replace a government nor make laws in its own right. The assembly of federal delegates, the *Bundesrat*, which Prussia's three class franchise ensured would be dominated

²⁵ See Scheel 1957, pp. 73–4, as well as Müller 1924a, p. 126 and p. 124 for a reproduction of an application with the *Kohle* note.

²⁶ Paul Blumenthal writes that Müller 'had a job as an exempted worker with a small Berlin company' before the January Strike of 1918. His return to Berlin was also supported by Hugo Haase, who worked diligently for Müller's release. The military had only limited use for him anyway due to his poor vision – the only available portrait of Richard Müller, reproduced in the front of this volume, shows him wearing thick glasses. In connection with a later conscription, Georg Ledebour even writes that Müller had been 'unfit for service'. See Paul Blumenthal's recollections in: Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957, p. 69; for more on Haase's efforts, see Winkler 1964, p. 311; Ledebour's statement in: Ledebour 1954, pp. 61ff.

²⁷ According to contemporary accounts, the Shop Stewards' 'inter-shop leadership' began in Berlin as a consequence of the suppression of the April strike. It is unclear, however, to what extent this differed from the previously existing network. See Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957, p. 53.

²⁸ Rosenberg 1991a, pp. 154–5.

by representatives of heavy industry and the landed aristocracy, had the right to veto any initiative it received from the Reichstag.

With the political system closed to them, anti-war activists and the radical left were forced to take their demands to the streets. More demonstrations followed in the summer and autumn of 1917 in response to calls from the USPD and the Spartacists. Leipzig and Braunschweig were the main focal points with political strikes that involved over 10,000 participants each. Although there is evidence that Richard Müller was told of the plans for these actions and evidently as many as 6,000 strike leaflets were delivered to a Berlin address, no attempt was made to initiate a strike in Berlin.²⁹ None of these local actions reached the level of the previous mass strikes; more widespread actions were not possible without the Shop Stewards' active collaboration, and they remained averse to action. Müller did not want the Shop Stewards to 'fracture the revolutionary forces' with small actions and thought that they should only take action when the workers' mood would sustain it and carry the movement forward. But it is equally likely that rivalries between the Shop Stewards, the USPD, and the Spartacists, the weakening of the Shop Stewards due to state repression, and the increased food supply in Berlin also played a role.³⁰

However, the Shop Stewards' political work continued. Richard Müller was part of a delegation at the DMV's union congress in Cologne, the second since the start of the war, from 27–30 June 1917. The rift between the DMV leadership and its members was clear and, unlike the previous general assembly in 1915, this time, the opposition had achieved an unprecedented cohesion and solidarity. Proposals submitted in advance of the meeting called, among other things, for the suspension of dues payments to the General Committee, the introduction of strikes, an end to the war through a negotiated peace, and a general resolution of conflicts through 'class struggle'.³¹

The executive board, however, did not want to be pushed in that direction. Rudolf Wissell, who represented the DMV in the General Committee of Trade Unions, made its categorical rejection of any form of systemic opposition clear. He tersely pointed out that 'The union is based on the existing economic order and works to improve its situation within that same order'.³² At the congress itself, however, the opposition did manage to push through a supplementary paper by Frankfurt union member, Robert Dissmann, and force an open

²⁹ See Luban 2008a, p. 13; Müller 1924a, p. 127.

³⁰ Müller 1924a, p. 137; Luban 2008a, p. 13.

³¹ Opel 1957, p. 65. For more on the 1915 union congress, see Winkler 1964, pp. 144ff. Richard Müller was not among the delegates to the 1915 congress.

³² *Metallarbeiter-Zeitung* 1917, no. 19, pp. 80–1.

discussion about the DMV's direction. Dissmann and Richard Müller were the main opposition spokesmen. Müller primarily criticised the union's participation in the *Hilfsdienstgesetz* and went so far as to identify his Berlin adversary, Adolf Cohen, as its intellectual originator.³³ In the end, however, the critics failed to democratise the union and could not even prevent the administrative board's re-election.³⁴ Their success lay only in achieving a certain unity among opposition groups and individuals. Open conflict with the executive board had been declared and arguments against the war could no longer be easily swept away. The Revolutionary Shop Stewards also used the union congress to expand their network and establish contacts throughout the country, although the organisation's main hub remained in Berlin.

Preparing for the January Strike: Rising Discontent and the Bolshevik Example

By the year's end, these new connections had brought the Shop Stewards reports of the growing outrage among workers. Now Richard Müller and his comrades determined that the time had come for new actions.³⁵

International events emboldened them further. Just as Russia's February Revolution and the fall of the Tsar had spurred the April 1917 strike, so the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 once again inspired the German working class to take action. The Shop Stewards' leaflets spread the news of the October Revolution and they began to turn indifferent workers into opposition workers and opposition workers into revolutionaries.³⁶ These workers were particularly outraged when the German delegation countered the embattled Russian government suing for peace without annexations with merciless demands for far-reaching territorial concessions – and succeeded. The official claim that the

33 *Protokoll der 13. ordentlichen Generalversammlung des Deutschen Metallarbeiter-Verbandes 1917*, pp. 77–80.

34 Opel 1957, pp. 67–8. For more on the union congress, see also Bieber 1981, pp. 505ff. as well as Winkler 1964, pp. 357ff.

35 Müller 1924a, p. 137.

36 Despite censorship, *Vorwärts* was able to print a radio address by Lenin and Trotsky called *To the Peoples of the Belligerent Countries* on 1 December 1917. It called for immediate peace negotiations. The call presented the Russian peace proposal as a clear result of the October Revolution, implying that a German Revolution would eventually make possible the long desired peace. For more on the leaflets, see the report by Otto Richter in: Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957, p. 63.

Germans were fighting a ‘defensive war’ was no longer plausible even to loyal social democratic or Christian workers.³⁷

In late 1917, the Shop Stewards contacted the executive board of the USPD to arrange a meeting with USPD Reichstag and Prussian state parliament (*Landtag*) members. They met in the USPD’s Reichstag meeting rooms. It was not the first time that subversive meetings were held in the Reichstag – after all, it had the inestimable advantage of being protected from police spies.³⁸ At this meeting, as he later recalled, Richard Müller reported to the USPD representatives on the general atmosphere among the workers: they were, he said, on the threshold of a new mass strike. The party’s open call for it would ‘ignite’ a ‘struggle that the government would be unable to suppress’.³⁹ Though written six years after the event, Müller’s wording suggests that he had hoped for a decisive revolutionary struggle with the government. The depth and breadth of the two previous mass strikes and the revolution in Russia had clearly radicalised him and the Shop Stewards.⁴⁰

Müller’s revolutionary expectations were, however, not shared by most of the USPD parliamentarians. A minority around Heinrich Ströbel simply did not believe Müller’s report on the workers’ mood while the majority around Hugo Haase believed him but were afraid that the party might be destroyed by government repression and so would not support his call to action. Only a third group around Georg Ledebour supported the Shop Stewards’ line fully and threatened to sign on to the call independently, if necessary. In the end, only an interim solution, which Müller opposed as a ‘rotten compromise’, was possible. On Adolf Hoffmann’s motion, a call for ‘protests’ was written, demanding peace without annexations according to the Reichstag resolution

³⁷ See Rosenberg 1991a, p. 179; on the developments leading to the Brest-Litowsk treaty see also Carr 1966, pp. 3–58.

³⁸ See Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957, p. 53. The Shop Stewards had similarly approached Leo Jogiches as a representative of the Spartacus League. See Luban 2008a, p. 14.

³⁹ Müller 1924a, p. 138.

⁴⁰ Schneider and Kuda write that the goal of a socialist revolution had been clear among the Shop Stewards since the summer of 1917, i.e., even before the October Revolution. Schneider and Kuda 1968, p. 21. Dirk H. Müller speaks more carefully of a ‘change in union politics’ taking place in the increasingly critical general assembly of the Berlin DMV at the same time as the Shop Stewards were undergoing their transformation into a more systematic organisation. Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 305ff. Richard Müller himself later claimed that the Shop Stewards realised ‘after the strike in April 1917’ that the German Reich could not avoid a military collapse. This may also have encouraged their hope for an impending revolution. Müller 1924a, p. 153.

of 1917 but without explicitly calling for a strike or uprising. All USPD parliamentarians at the meeting signed the call.⁴¹

The Shop Stewards went ahead with a strike anyway. They had the call secretly reproduced and distributed it to USPD organisations throughout Germany. Internal discussion set the strike date for 28 January 1918 but kept it secret in order to prevent counterpropaganda and to use the element of surprise on the government.

Although the secret strike date was not revealed even to their contacts in the USPD and the Spartacus League, the Spartacists published a leaflet a few days before 28 January calling for an indefinite strike starting that day. The element of surprise was lost. This was precisely the sort of actionism that the Shop Stewards had wanted to prevent. It appears that a Spartacist among the Shop Stewards, Bruno Peters, was the source of the leak. The Shop Stewards did not exclude him from their meetings because he represented the opposition at his factory and had been selected as a delegate. Peters thought that the Shop Stewards' tactics were too hesitant and wanted to move workers into the strike.⁴²

It is probably a mark of the mood in the labour movement that the pro-government executives of the social democratic unions did not react: only the central council of the liberal Hirsch-Duncker unions issued an opposing call.⁴³ These business-friendly unions constituted a small minority in the German union movement and their action was inconsequential. While conservative forces were paralysed or sidelined, revolutionary currents found resonance: the call from the Spartacus League included information about the ongoing mass strike in Vienna and other Austro-Hungarian cities since mid-January, which further enflamed the mood in Berlin. In the end, the Spartacists' risky indiscretion worked to the revolutionaries' advantage.⁴⁴ The day before the strike, the lathe operators held an official section assembly where Richard

⁴¹ For more on the meeting, see Paul Blumenthal in: *Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957*, p. 69, as well as Müller 1924a, p. 138. According to Blumenthal, the meeting happened in November 1917, while Richard Müller claims that it did not occur until January 1918.

⁴² See Müller 1924a, p. 139 and Bruno Peters' oral history interview, SAPMO-BArch, memoirs, SG Y 30/ 0099, p. 19. The leaflet itself is reproduced in Müller 1924a, pp. 238ff. Paul Blumenthal and Paul Scholze also had contact with the Spartacus League, at least later. See Luban 2008a, p. 10.

⁴³ Also reproduced in: Müller 1924a, pp. 239ff. The liberal unions were known by the names of their co-founders, Max Hirsch and Franz Duncker.

⁴⁴ Walter Bartel's view that the Spartacists' leaflet signified that they were the 'instigators and organisers' of the strike is still widely held today. In fact, the USPD board's leaflet mobilised far more people and the workplace organising was done by the Revolutionary

Müller made the call for a strike official. All the roughly 1,500 lathe operators who were present accepted the plan and prepared for the strike.

The January 1918 Strike: Council Power Emerges

On the morning of 28 January 1918, the lathe operators and Shop Stewards signalled the beginning of the strike by striking the oxygen tanks used for welding with hammers.⁴⁵ Within a few hours Berlin's entire armament industry came to a standstill. By the afternoon of the first day, 414 delegates representing 400,000 workers gathered for a meeting in the Berlin union hall. Richard Müller led the assembly and received their demands. By unanimous decision, the demand for peace without annexations or indemnities as well as consultation with labour representatives from every nation at the peace negotiations was set. Domestic demands included better food supply, an end to the state of siege, restoration of freedom of the press, an end to military interference in union affairs, and a 'drastic democratisation of the entire state apparatus', beginning with universal suffrage – including women's suffrage – for the Prussian Landtag or state parliament. This last was particularly important because the three class franchise in this, the largest state of the German Federation made it the main pillar of the authoritarian regime. In addition to these demands, the delegates vowed 'to fend off any disciplinary action against our leaders, representatives, or delegates with all of the power that we have' and called for mass strikes throughout the German Empire and in the other belligerent countries.⁴⁶ They then elected an Action Committee as the strike leadership. With this catalogue of demands, the strikers set a goal of toppling the authoritarian German state. If fulfilled, these demands would make up for the failed bourgeois revolution of 1848 and allow Germany to catch up with the constitutional-democracy achieved two generations before in leading European countries such as France and Britain.

The January Strike could not be dismissed as one preoccupied with the issue of food as the April 1917 strike could. The strikers had learned from Cohen's

Shop Stewards. See Bartel 1957, pp. 140–83; for a more realistic view, see Luban 2008a, pp. 16ff.

⁴⁵ See Paul Blumenthal in: Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957, p. 72. For more on the overall course of the January Strike, see Opel 1957, p. 70; Müller 1924a, p. 139; Bartel 1957; the most recent research is presented in the anthology *Streiken gegen den Krieg*: Boebel and Wentzel 2008.

⁴⁶ The catalogue of demands is reproduced in: Müller 1924a, p. 240 and in Dittmann 1995, p. 526.

manipulative strike leadership the year before. They explicitly opposed the established labour movement's organisation and leadership. They would no longer accept 'disciplinary action' or condescension. Although their demands were not yet council-democratic, workers' council practices pervaded the strike: rank-and-file delegates directly determined demands and actions, the Action Committee received its mandate from them and its legitimacy was not mediated by parties or unions. Indeed, many of the councils that spontaneously emerged throughout Germany during the Revolution later that year followed the example of the January Strike leadership in Berlin.⁴⁷ Wilhelm Dittmann's recollections testify to the novelty of these organisational forms even for the USPD. As a representative of that party, Dittmann was present for the election of the Action Committee and so knew exactly where the initiative was coming from. Despite this, he identified Müller and his comrades as merely the USPD's 'representatives in the job sites who called themselves the "Revolutionary Shop Stewards"', while describing the entire movement as a single action initiated by the USPD executive board.⁴⁸

In reality, the Stewards did not represent the USPD in the workplaces, but used the party as a platform to expand their tactics of shop-floor resistance and mass strikes on a supra-regional level. But from the perspective of Dittmann as a party politician, it had to be the other way round: the party lead and the workers followed. It is because such narratives were repeated in many variations by social democratic memoir literature that the role of the Shop Stewards became obscured in historiography.

The Politics of the Action Committee and the End of the January Strike

The members of the Action Committee were almost exclusively Shop Stewards: Paul Eckert, Paul Neuendorf, Paul Blumenthal, Heinrich Malzahn, Richard Müller, Otto Kraatz, Paul Scholze, Otto Tost, Fritz Zimmermann, Paul Tirpitz, and Cläre Casper. Cläre Casper was the only one who had not previously been

⁴⁷ von Oertzen 1976, pp. 75ff.

⁴⁸ Dittmann 1995, p. 526. Peter von Oertzen commented on the understanding of workers' political potential among social democrats: 'The workers *as such* were not subjects capable of acting for themselves. In [the social democrats'] eyes, only the party and union organisations were capable of acting, and entitled to act': von Oertzen 1976, pp. 76f.

a member of the group and, after being elected to the Action Committee, she was also accepted into the Shop Stewards' group as its only female member.⁴⁹

Casper's achievement was quite remarkable. Although some female workers had explicitly demanded it before the war, the DMV had never established an independent representation system for female employees. Women were always forced to take their concerns to the male union leaders.⁵⁰ Casper emerged as a female delegate in the strike leadership against all these odds and represented some critical changes that had taken place during the war. The number of female workers had increased enormously and faced circumstances that were anything but simple. While the men, apart from exempted skilled workers, apprentices and older workers, were at the front, the women had to do 'men's work' in the factories in addition to child and household care. As unskilled labour, they often performed particularly mindless, exhausting and, not infrequently, dangerous tasks. This made them the leading forces of the mass strikes beginning at least as early as April 1917. Indeed, witnesses report that while their presence in the strike leadership was limited to Casper, the January Strike was largely the work of women.⁵¹

After they elected the Action Committee as their strike leadership, the delegates assembled on 28 January invited the USPD leadership to send three representatives to the Action Committee but rejected a motion to grant the SPD the same privilege by a two-vote majority. With the unity of the labour movement always at the forefront of his mind, Richard Müller intervened and asked, as the assembly chairman, for the motion to be accepted. He carried such authority that the assembly relented and SPD representatives were included on the Action Committee. Müller would later justify his actions by saying that the leadership at the meeting did not want 'to create any discord' and he may also have wanted to pull the SPD rank and file to the left through participation in the strike.⁵² As he recalled in his testimony at court during a lawsuit in 1924, Müller felt that, 'it would be great if the right-wing socialists themselves would

⁴⁹ Zimmermann was a member of the Action Committee, but not a regular member of the Stewards. See Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvortand des FDGB 1960, p. 115, pp. 354–63. See also Cläre Casper's oral history interview, BArch SAPMO, SG Y 30/ 0148.

⁵⁰ Dirk H. Müller 1985b, pp. 155–78.

⁵¹ See the report by Walter Sparfeld and Ernst Fischer in: Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957, pp. 74ff. Women's employment dropped again over the course of the postwar demobilisation and there were few protests against this development. See Grebing 1994, p. 24.

⁵² Müller 1924a, p. 140.

participate in what they had considered treason two years before.⁵³ But since it was the leadership of the SPD that was co-opted into the Action Committee, rather than its rank-and-file members who were often as critical of the war as Müller and his comrades, the emancipation of the workers from their inherited leaders was compromised. Moreover, the co-optation also gave the SPD leadership leverage to control the strike. Still, Müller's hopes were not entirely unfulfilled. The SPD's double role as the party that condemned the strike while taking part in its leadership led at least some workers to break with it and join the USPD.⁵⁴

The USPD sent the Shop Stewards, Hugo Haase, Wilhelm Dittmann, and Georg Ledebour, all of whom the Stewards already knew, as its representatives; the SPD sent Friedrich Ebert, Philipp Scheidemann, and Otto Braun. The committee began its work as soon as the SPD representatives arrived. At first the SPD partially distanced itself from the strike's demands made at the Berlin union hall on 28 January and instead called for parity with the Shop Stewards in the Action Committee, hoping to serve as a counterweight to them. That demand was rejected. Before any other organisational questions could be discussed, word came that the police had arrived. Richard Müller described the scene that followed in the first volume of his history of the Revolution:

The three SPD representatives jumped to their feet. Despite his age, Scheidemann leaped like a gazelle into his overcoat while the somewhat overweight Fritz Ebert had a great deal of trouble with his and had to be helped by a sympathetic soul. The labour representatives were not at all surprised by the report. They had been in similar situations often. They would calmly complete the work with the care and diligence necessary.⁵⁵

Once the Social Democrats had fled, the Action Committee was able to end its discussions without being arrested. The police were not as close as the panicking SPD-delegates had feared and the workers dispersed to elect strike leaders for their respective companies in the factories. These strike committees were banned in Berlin on the following day by the regional military authority, the

⁵³ Müller's testimony during a lawsuit filed by Friedrich Ebert against a journalist who had called him guilty of 'high treason' can be found in Brammer 1925.

⁵⁴ Jakob Weber (born: 1892), who was a story-writer and would later participate in the German Revolution, was one example. BArch – SAPMO, Jakob Weber's oral history interview, SG Y 30/0985, p. 17.

⁵⁵ Müller 1924a, p. 141.

Oberkommando in den Marken, while the police broke up all other assemblies. Despite this repression, the number of striking workers reached half a million.

The Action Committee now sought negotiations with the government and informed the secretary of the interior, Wallraf, that a negotiating team consisting of workers and parliamentarians was ready to meet him. In addition to the SPD's Philipp Scheidemann and the USPD's Hugo Haase, the delegation included Richard Müller and Paul Scholze. The Ministry, however, refused to meet this delegation. Müller described the events:

Over an hour went by and the committee was still standing around like beggars at the gates. Scheidemann became nervous and, given the Secretary's attitude, the other committee members wanted to give up on a reception altogether. Scheidemann was admirably tenacious. He ran back and forth, grabbed any attendant or councillor that he could get his hands on, discussed and gesticulated until he finally caught the Catholic Centre Party (Zentrumsparthei) representative Giesbert and came back bright red with joy, telling us that Giesbert had promised to get him a meeting with Wallraf. Wallraf nonetheless did not receive the committee.⁵⁶

He did, however, agree to talk only with Scheidemann and Haase, both members of parliament, while refusing to receive the workers, Müller and Scholze.

That same evening, the strike leadership was declared illegal and their assemblies banned. Action Committee members were even ordered to appear at police headquarters and confirm their awareness of this order in writing. The Action Committee continued to meet nonetheless. *Vorwärts* was banned on 30 January and Berlin printers joined the strike. When demonstrations and assemblies were announced for 31 January, the police broke them up, arresting Wilhelm Dittmann, USPD delegate to the strike leadership.

Philipp Scheidemann was not arrested, but he was beaten by the police. He was wild with rage at the Action Committee meeting that afternoon – as a member of parliament he had never experienced such treatment before.⁵⁷ As events unfolded, the SPD representatives made every effort to moderate the strike amid heightening tensions. Though at the time they invoked fearful visions of its defeat and the brutal repression of the working class that would surely follow, their real motivation was revealed a few years later. In 1924 Friedrich Ebert, by then elevated to the office of *Reichspräsident* or head

⁵⁶ See Müller 1924a, p. 143.

⁵⁷ Müller 1924a, p. 144.

of state, had filed a lawsuit against a journalist who had accused him of ‘high treason’ for his participation in the strike. At court Ebert said that he and his party had only participated in the strike to slow it down and stop it as quickly as possible. This was not some later turnaround: two of Ebert’s sons had died in the war, fighting for Germany, and their father never did identify with the strikers’ antimilitarism.⁵⁸

Ebert’s agenda was, in any case, more unambiguously on display in his address to an open strike assembly in Berlin’s Treptower Park in 1918 when he said that it was the obligation of workers ‘to support their brothers and fathers at the front and to send them the best weapons that exist’ because ‘obviously, victory is what every German wants’. These statements, in which he publicly distanced himself from the cause of the strike, met with strong opposition and the audience cursed him as a ‘strike breaker’ and a ‘traitor to the workers’.⁵⁹ He was forced to backpedal. Neither he nor Scheidemann openly distanced themselves from the strike after that. Instead, they advocated negotiations between the General Committee of Trade Unions (Generalkommission der Gewerkschaften), the national trade-union federation, and the chancellor. The USPD representatives remained neutral on that proposal, but Müller and the Shop Stewards rejected it as it would disempower them as the strike’s leadership and hand over control to the General Committee of Trade Unions, which was under Social Democratic control and supported the *Burgfrieden*. The strike continued and the unrest in the streets only increased. There were fights and riots – including a protest against strikebreaking trolley drivers, whose trolley cars were overturned by angry strikers.⁶⁰

The USPD representatives came around to Ebert and Scheidemann’s position after some larger factories were threatened with military occupation on 1 February. Haase and Ledebour now negotiated separately with the chancellor and attempted to convene a new assembly of delegates to clarify the course the strike would take. But the chancellor insisted that the strike be called off at the very first meeting of this new assembly. This was an unacceptable condition and the now illegal Action Committee had to decide: continue the action, call it off, or cede negotiations to the General Committee of Trade Unions. The Spartacus League supported escalating the strike to the point of revolt under the slogan ‘Perseverance at all costs’,⁶¹ while the SPD wanted to hand negotiations over to the General Committee. The decision came down to the

58 For a documentation of the lawsuit see Brammer 1925.

59 Bartel 1957, p. 163; Brammer 1925, pp. 68–9.

60 See Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957, p. 82.

61 See leaflet ‘Ausharren um jeden Preis’ in: Müller 1924a, p. 243.

eleven Shop Stewards on the Action Committee. Under no circumstances were they willing to allow the General Committee of Trade Unions to take over. It had taken them years of agitation to lead the working class in a mass political strike against the opposition of the pro-war General Committee and the union bureaucracy. But they did not want to be responsible for escalating the strike further either. As long as the army was still intact, the Shop Stewards were afraid that there might be a massacre given that there were already troops in Berlin who were disciplined and ready to fire on strikers.

In the end, the Shop Stewards decided to call for an end to the strike and instructed their representatives accordingly. The strike in Berlin ended on 3 February and other cities followed with nothing gained. Richard Müller would try to justify the decision in a later account:

It was clear that that outcome would be considered a defeat for the workers and a victory for the government by everyone from *Vorwärts* to the *Kreuz-Zeitung*. But that didn't matter. What was important was how the people who continued the struggle would feel about such an outcome. And the leadership made no mistake about that... The workers did not feel defeated; they felt like fighters who retreated so that they could make a stronger push later.⁶²

It remains uncertain whether most workers shared Müller's retrospective view. The strike in Berlin had in fact begun to crumble even before the signal to end it was given; the initiative had already started slipping away from the strike leadership. After it ended, the military authorities went to work: as in the aftermath of the April strike, masses of striking workers and ringleaders were ordered into military service and once again identified as politically unreliable by a code word on their documents. Richard Müller was also drafted again. This time there was no easy escape and he remained in the military until September 1918. Even then he was only able to return to Berlin through luck and the solidarity of his comrades. While the failure of the strike to win any of its demands and the brutal repression that followed demoralised the working class, that low point would not last long.⁶³ After all, during the January Strike, the

62 *Vorwärts* was the central organ of the SPD; the *Kreuz-Zeitung* was a conservative newspaper. Müller 1924a, p. 147.

63 According to Walter Bartel, 50,000 workers, or 10 percent of the strikers, were sent to the front. Bartel 1957, p. 178. For more on the strikers, see also Morgan 1975, p. 91; as well as Müller 1924a, pp. 124f., p. 163.

workers had experienced power as never before. They had paralysed the armament industry and forced the SPD leadership into a unified front from below.

Barth and Däumig Lead in Müller's Absence

Repressing labour activities by pressing them into military service proved a double-edged sword. Müller later called this policy 'the military authorities' greatest mistake'. Large numbers of revolutionary-minded workers continued their agitation at the front, whether by organising or through private conversations.⁶⁴ These activities, as Müller himself admitted, could not dent the army's iron discipline until the summer of 1918, but as defeat loomed, they became increasingly effective.⁶⁵

After the January Strike it was clear to the Shop Stewards that the military authorities at least knew of the existence of their organisation, even if they did not know exactly how it functioned or who its members were. The Shop Stewards met immediately after the strike ended and each member named a substitute in order to keep the organisation ready for action in the event of a mass arrest. Before he was drafted, Müller named Emil Barth, leader of the plumber's section within the Berlin DMV, as his substitute to lead the Shop Stewards.⁶⁶ It was not an easy decision for Müller. He was forced to perform the impossible task of selecting someone who was both capable of leading the movement yet unknown: any known candidate was just as likely to be arrested as he was. He rejected the idea of choosing a politician from the USPD because he thought that would jeopardise the Shop Stewards' independence. As he later recollects, he decided on Barth because he 'had contributed a great deal to the Shop Stewards' expansion' even if 'his fantastical speeches' had to be accepted as an 'unavoidable evil'.⁶⁷

After Müller's arrest, Barth led the Berlin Workers' Support Committee, which supported victims of the repression that followed the strike.⁶⁸ However,

⁶⁴ Georg Ledebour had the same view in 1919. Ledebour 1954, p. 61.

⁶⁵ This particularly applies to the western front. See Müller 1924a, pp. 152f. On the eastern front, by contrast, by 1917 this continually led to fraternisation. See contemporary reports in: Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957, p. 86.

⁶⁶ Müller-Franken 1928, p. 100. On Barth, see also Ryder 1967.

⁶⁷ Müller 1924a, p. 163.

⁶⁸ The Committee (Unterstützungskommission der Berliner Arbeiterschaft) included various members of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, but also SPD representatives. It can be viewed as an institutional link between the January Strike's Action Committee and

during the November 1918 Revolution he would become estranged from Müller and the Shop Stewards. For, as a USPD representative to the Council of People's Deputies (Rat der Volksbeauftragten), he would be part of the revolutionary government that eventually overshadowed the power of the Executive Council of the Workers and Soldiers Council that Müller led and that expressed his council socialist ideas most closely. After the revolution failed, Barth and Müller would issue a series of impassioned broadsides against one another.⁶⁹ These later events could only add to whatever original misgivings Müller had about Barth as a substitute.

In the summer of 1918, Ernst Däumig joined the Shop Stewards. Däumig was not a rank-and-file worker but an intellectual, former editor of *Vorwärts*, and author of short stories and theatre pieces. His open and unyielding opposition to the war cost him his job in 1916 and thereafter he took over a local Social Democratic newsletter and made it into an oppositional organ. Like Müller, he too had been thrown off course by events: transformed from a party worker into a revolutionary.⁷⁰

Däumig became 'the only intellectual and outsider whom the Revolutionary Shop Stewards accepted and regarded as one of their own'.⁷¹ And with reason: the playwright proved more pragmatic than the plumber Emil Barth and took on the task of 'bringing Barth's cliché-ridden speeches back down to earth'.⁷²

According to Müller, that is how Däumig became part of the 'actual leadership' of the Shop Stewards. The two worked closely together following Müller's return in September 1918⁷³ and their collaboration developed into a personal friendship that lasted through most of Müller's political life, even surviving the Shop Steward movement. Müller and Däumig joined the Revolution together, experienced its defeat, fought for the council system, joined the Communist Party and broke with it at almost the same time during the crisis of 1921. Only Däumig's death in 1922 ended their common path.

the Executive Council that formed in November. See Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, p. xi; Dirk H. Müller 1985a, p. 316.

⁶⁹ In his memoirs, Barth described Müller as competent and radical but 'completely apolitical'. Müller in turn called Barth's entire book 'vain, fantastical posturing'. See Barth 1919, p. 11; Müller 1924a, p. 46.

⁷⁰ The newsletter was the *Mitteilungs-Blatt des Verbandes sozialdemokratischer Wahlvereine Berlins und Umgegend*. It became an organ of the USPD in 1917; Däumig ran it until 1918. See Morgan 1983. Before turning towards socialism, Däumig had been an officer in the German colonial forces. See Weir 2010.

⁷¹ Schneider and Kuda 1968, p. 21.

⁷² Müller 1924a, p. 163.

⁷³ Ibid.

Müller's Return

It is unlikely that Richard Müller ever handled weapons during his military service. His thick glasses hardly qualified him for combat. According to Georg Ledebour, he was simply 'drafted and stuck in some military camp... even though he was unfit for service'.⁷⁴ He was eventually released from the military service not because of being 'unfit', but thanks to a peculiar turn of events. Reichstag President, Johannes Kaempf, died on 25 May 1918 and a by-election was called to fill his Reichstag seat.⁷⁵ The constituency happened to be the Berlin district where Müller lived and the USPD nominated him as its Reichstag candidate at the insistence of Georg Ledebour.⁷⁶ The vote was set for 15 October. The military authorities were forced to let Müller go. He left the military in September and plunged into the electoral campaign, a new and unusual role for him. The campaign came at a turbulent moment. By early October, the collapse of the western front was no longer a secret. Even General Ludendorff of the Supreme Army Command (Oberste Heeresleitung) was pleading for a truce and in doing so had admitted Germany's military defeat. Ludendorff would also be forced to give up his unofficial but firm control of domestic politics when Kaiser Wilhelm named the liberal Prince Maximilian of Baden as the new chancellor on 3 October. In fulfilment of a truce condition set by US President Woodrow Wilson, the prince was to transform Imperial Germany into a parliamentary democracy. To confirm his intention of doing so, he appointed Philipp Scheidemann as *Staatssekretär*, a minister with cabinet rank, but without portfolio, and the social democratic unionist Gustav Bauer, vice chairman of the General Committee of Trade Unions, to head the newly created Imperial Labour Office (Reichsarbeitsamt), making them the first Social Democratic cabinet members in the history of the German Empire.⁷⁷ Scheidemann's position as *Staatssekretär* corresponded to that of a minister who was directly responsible to the chancellor. The SPD caucus chose Scheidemann to enter the government even though, with defeat looming, he had come out resolutely against the SPD becoming accountable to the

⁷⁴ Ledebour 1954, p. 61.

⁷⁵ The Reichstag president was the equivalent of the speaker of the Reichstag.

⁷⁶ Ledebour 1954, pp. 61f. Müller had lived in Berlin's Tempelhof neighbourhood since at least 1912 and was therefore registered with the police in the proper district, see *Historische Einwohnermeldekarte (EMK)* at Landesarchiv Berlin.

⁷⁷ August Müller was given a position in the Department of Agriculture and Food (Kriegernährungsamt) in 1917, but only as an undersecretary, a rung below cabinet-rank government ministers.

crumbling regime. He acquiesced ‘with snarls and grumbling’, as he put it later. The party faction that most favoured participation in the government was led by Friedrich Ebert, with Albert Südekum and Gustav Noske as important supporters.⁷⁸ Other posts were filled by members of the Catholic Centre Party and the Progressive People’s Party (*Fortschrittliche Volkspartei*, a liberal party).⁷⁹

These initial steps towards democratisation had been rejected as unacceptable during the January Strike, but were now expected to save Wilhelm II’s crown and keep Germany from total capitulation. However, even President Wilson found them insufficient and rejected an initial truce offer by the new chancellor.

The mood among the people was more tense than it had ever been and the government’s weakness was more obvious. Müller’s electoral campaign reflected both. As one eyewitness reported,

I was in an assembly where Richard Müller gave a campaign speech. The assembly was well attended. I don’t remember what Müller said that was so inflammatory, but in any case the police officer who had been keeping watch, a particularly bold character, suddenly ordered the assembly to disperse. There was a tremendous racket after that, booing and hissing. I thought the people were going to storm the stage at any minute and drag that officer away. He must have thought the same because he stood on the stage with both hands in his pockets where that pig definitely had a revolver. Leaflets suddenly flew from the rostrum into the hall and the people jumped for them. Everyone tried to catch one... That gutsy officer would not have been so bold four weeks later during Liebknecht’s meetings because he would have gotten a good beating.⁸⁰

The officer did not get a beating, but the episode shows that the government’s authority was already beginning to be questioned by the autumn of 1918.

Müller coped with his candidacy until the election, in which he lost to potash industrialist Maximilian Kempner. Kempner, however, would not last long in the Reichstag: events were now moving quickly.⁸¹ The election was not the only thing that Richard Müller had been working on since his release. Although a seat in a democratic Reichstag would have meant an opportunity for real influence, he was engaged in an entirely different political game. After the

⁷⁸ Scheidemann 2002, pp. 89–92.

⁷⁹ Winkler 2006a, p. 364.

⁸⁰ Friedel Gräf oral history interview, BArch SAPMO, SG Y30/0297, pp. 42f.

⁸¹ See Müller-Franken 1928, p. 100.

campaign speeches were over for the evening, the Shop Stewards' secret meetings would begin. Germany's transformation into a parliamentary monarchy, which had been the Shop Stewards' most far-reaching demand in April 1917, was no longer sufficient. Nor was the Social Democrats' faith in an evolutionary path to socialism, starting with Reichstag and Prussian electoral reform. A socialist revolution was what now stirred emotions inside and outside the Revolutionary Shop Stewards' inner circle.

CHAPTER 5

The German Revolution in Berlin: 1918

During the war the Shop Stewards had organised an escalating series of political mass strikes and one may be tempted to take the revolutionary events of November 1918 in Berlin as the fourth and final mass strike. But they were much more. The three previous strikes had radicalised the Stewards and workers of Berlin and other industrial centres and they now believed that only a revolution would end war and hunger. The Spartacists had, it is true, believed in revolution from the beginning, but without the masses the Stewards represented, the Spartacists could not act. This chapter will deal with the cooperation between the Stewards, the Spartacists and the USPD in the last year of the war and argue that the Stewards were crucial in making the German Revolution in November 1918.

The Stewards and the Spartacists: A Tale of Two Styles

Long-standing differences in the political styles of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Spartacists had bred new tensions by the summer of 1918 when the Spartacists were badly weakened by informers and arrests and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, fearful of suffering the same, had cut off all contact with them. After Karl Liebknecht reclaimed leadership of the Spartacists that October these tensions only rose higher.

Liebknecht had been released as part of attempts at democratisation as defeat loomed. Though the military tried to keep his release a secret to avoid disturbances, Liebknecht was triumphantly greeted by thousands of workers at Berlin's Anhalter Bahnhof on 23 October 1918.¹ Rosa Luxemburg, meanwhile, remained in 'protective custody'. Though, unlike Liebknecht, she had never been legally convicted, it appeared that the military leadership feared her influence more given that she, not Liebknecht, was the Spartacists' intellectual leader.

By autumn 1918 Liebknecht regularly participated in the Shop Stewards' secret meetings and brought other Spartacists along. An even wider circle of Spartacists, Shop Stewards, and the left-wing members of the USPD also regularly attended illegal meetings under the rubric of the Executive Committee

¹ See Laschitsa 2007, p. 376; Friedel Gräf oral history interview, BArch SAPMO, SG Y 30/0297.

of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils (Vollzugsausschuss des Arbeiter- und Soldatenrates), usually called, simply, the workers' council.

While their collaboration represented the radical left's recovery from the mutual tensions of the summer, the new rapprochement between the two organisations did not increase Liebknecht's enthusiasm for the Shop Stewards' tactics.² And he did not keep his criticisms to himself. Naturally, old conflicts resurfaced. Müller later recalled that, '[Liebknecht] did not see the group as an association of committed revolutionaries. At most, he thought of it as a club of feral bourgeois philistines who met in secret and never informed the world of their existence'.³ Such choice left invective may have been attributed to Liebknecht by Müller but the former certainly had long failed to comprehend the Shop Stewards' secret and unassuming style, born of legitimate caution and the down-to-earth assessment of possibilities.

It was certainly true that until then the Shop Stewards kept a low public profile. Unlike the parties or the Spartacus League, they conducted their propaganda in workshops and expanded their network of representatives secretly. They did not organise demonstrations or other street propaganda. They were action-oriented and placed very little value on the kind of ideological propaganda or theoretical work that the Spartacists usually engaged in, let alone the sort of grand gestures so integral to Liebknecht's style.⁴ Their forum was the factory and their form of political action was the general strike. Although they could lead hundreds of thousands of workers in a strike, the Stewards' organisation and their mode of operation were known only to their members. It was only in December 1918, weeks after the Revolution, that the Shop Stewards met in public for the first time and issued a press statement under their own name. How little known they were until then became clear when even a commentator for the USPD newspaper, *Freiheit*, had no idea who the Shop Stewards really were.⁵

2 Luban 2008a, p. 23.

3 'einen Klub wild gewordener Spiessbürger': Müller 1924a, p. 165.

4 Fritz Opel notes that the Shop Stewards did not at first have a political plan of their own and, despite the autonomy of their actions, were dependent upon the Spartacists and the USPD to provide political analysis of the war that went beyond their shop-floor experience. Opel 1957, p. 55.

5 Morgan 1975, p. 209. Even the name 'Revolutionary Shop Stewards', which we have used to designate the group for the entire duration of its existence for the sake of simplicity, only appeared during the German Revolution in 1918.

This clandestine way of working was foreign to Liebknecht. As a politician, he was accustomed to the volatile publicity of electoral campaigns and actions and his temperament was better suited to grandstanding than to building networks in secrecy. And after two years in prison he was more than usually eager for public action and impatient with the Shop Stewards' caution and their inclination to take the pulse of the working class before acting. Müller, for his part, complained that 'According to Liebknecht and the other Spartacists, the workers had to be continuously in action, continuously engaged in struggle. Demonstrations, strikes and clashes with the police were supposed to stir the masses' revolutionary élan and build up to the Revolution... They referred to the experience of the Russian Revolution as the rationale'.⁶

Against such actionism, Richard Müller and the Shop Stewards stuck to their guns and took the position that Russian tactics did not apply to Germany because German workers were not ready to take the slogan 'death to the bourgeoisie' to its logical conclusion. Instead they were habituated to day-to-day union struggles and had achieved much through them, including better wages and the world's first social security system. Müller, in particular, distinguished between his own ideas and the actual state of working-class consciousness: 'Over time, every family accumulates hard-earned items that would be painful to lose. There are some workers who are not outfitted merely as petit bourgeois but as bourgeois proper'.⁷ The German working class of 1918 had quite a bit more to lose than their chains and therefore would not follow the Spartacus League's line voluntarily – that was Müller's quite realistic assessment of the situation.

The Shop Stewards' stubbornness frustrated not only Karl Liebknecht but all Spartacists who felt that the Shop Stewards should accept the group's superior wisdom. Jacob Walcher, for instance, felt that Müller not only 'lacked any basic theoretical knowledge' but 'influenced the creation and politics of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards in a way that was not entirely positive. The negative part was expressed in a strong tendency toward the schematic and in his refusal to work closely with the Spartacus League'.⁸

Apart from these differences of political approach, rivalry between the two groups also contributed to conflict between them. At heart, the Shop Stewards were just as committed to revolution as Karl Liebknecht and the Spartacus

⁶ Ibid. Liebknecht's growing impatience in prison was also caused by a lack of information. Only limited news had reached him during his incarceration. See Laschitzka 2007, p. 349.

⁷ Müller 1924a, p. 167.

⁸ Papers of Jacob Walcher, SAPMO-BArch, NY/4087/12.

League. But they rejected their tactic of permanent action and ridiculed it as 'revolutionary gymnastics'.⁹ As with the third mass strike the previous January, the Shop Stewards did not want to initiate action until the mood was right – and then they wanted to spring into action on a massive scale throughout Germany. The element of surprise was meant to give the Empire an additional, final blow and overthrow it. This time, the Shop Stewards were not preparing for just another mass strike, however big and impressive; they were preparing for Revolution.

Arming the Revolution

For weeks, Emil Barth had organised the purchase and collection of weapons. Despite the mortal risk involved, they were hidden in private homes such as Cläre Casper's.¹⁰ As a single woman, she would never be suspected of secret-ing weapons. Other women, including Lucie Heimburger-Gottschar, were also involved in the dangerous work of smuggling weapons: 'As I recall, quite a lot of young girls participated in the preparations for the Revolution. We helped the Revolutionary Shop Stewards of Berlin to distribute leaflets... We were also entrusted with taking away weapons or picking them up beforehand. As was the way of the labour movement of this time, Cläre Casper and Lucie Heimburger would later participate in the Executive Council of the Greater Berlin Workers' Council, but as secretaries rather than council members.'¹¹

Barth apparently acquired money for weapons from the Soviet embassy. Müller would later deny that the Shop Stewards received money from abroad

⁹ Richard Müller's critical text on the Spartacists was translated into English as 'Revolutionary Gymnastics', in Kuhn 2012, pp. 76-9. See also Wilhelm Pieck's recollections in Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB 1960, pp. 363ff. and Müller 1924a, pp. 165ff.

¹⁰ See the report from Cläre Casper in Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB 1960, pp. 359ff. and, for more details, Cläre Casper's oral history interview file, BArch SAPMO, SG Y 30/0148, p. 5, pp. 24ff.

¹¹ Lucie Heimburger-Gottschar, *Erinnerungen*, Larch Berlin, C Rep 902-02-04, no. 005. Ultimately, only a few women were elected as members of the workers' councils despite their active participation in the strikes. Most of those who were elected came from traditionally female-dominated fields like the textile industry or department stores. The first female members of the Executive Council were teachers who were elected in 1919 as members of the 'democrats', a faction of liberals who participated in the council system and argued for a moderate and institutional course. See Grebing 1994, p. 11 and Engel, Holtz and Materna 1997, p. xiv.

without, however, revealing where the money came from instead.¹² Historian Ottokar Luban, who reconstructed the weapons procurement processes in considerable detail from available archival sources, found that the Shop Stewards had been in contact with the Bolsheviks starting in September 1918. A representative of the Russian revolutionaries actually participated in a Shop Stewards' meeting in mid-September. To ensure secrecy, they had no further direct contact with the Shop Stewards and the money was not transferred until October. Luban was able to discover, further, that the Shop Stewards also attempted to obtain financing from an Amsterdam-based Alsatian named André Jung who was under orders from the French secret service. The man behind this, the French military attaché in The Hague, General Boucabaille, insisted that his government provide funding for the Shop Stewards. Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau and his cabinet discussed this offer extensively but baulked at taking such a risky step, repeatedly stalling the Shop Stewards' emissaries before finally denying them funds for weapons in early November 1918.¹³

The Shop Stewards continually postponed the uprising at the secret meetings despite the impatience of the Spartacists in general and Karl Liebknecht in particular, principally because the arms they sought came late and, in their view, were insufficient. Under no circumstances did they want to engage in a struggle for Berlin, the capital, without being prepared for the possibility of armed counter-attack by loyal soldiers. Ernst Däumig, who had been a non-commissioned officer for years before the war, was secretly assigned to determine the mood among the troops in Berlin.¹⁴

Outbreak

Detailed deployment plans were prepared and a choreography of revolution emerged at last on the morning of 2 November, when the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and the Spartacists met in a pub in Berlin-Neukölln. Several armed marches would proceed from the large factories on the city's periphery to the barracks and then, along with deserting soldiers and the additional weapons they brought, they would occupy the key positions in the city. It was quite clear

¹² Müller 1924a, p. 165. Several cases of weapons were also stolen from munitions factories; a manner of acquiring arms that was far more dangerous but also more affordable. See Hans Pfeiffer: *Erinnerungen*, LArch Berlin, C Rep 902-02-04, no. 007.

¹³ Luban 2008a, pp. 20ff.

¹⁴ On Ernst Däumig's military record, see Weir 2010.

to the revolutionaries that they could not win an armed battle with a loyal army. The troops would therefore have to either be intimidated or surprised into remaining neutral or, better yet, persuaded to desert. Armed workers and deserting soldiers would therefore have to be at the front to face down the police and remaining loyal troops and deter them from fighting. The revolutionaries had even secured the collaboration of some members of the Berlin fire department through contacts made by Richard Müller's younger brother Hugo, a firefighter stationed at Unter den Linden.¹⁵

Even as the finishing touches were being applied to these plans for the uprising in Berlin, however, the German November Revolution was breaking out elsewhere. The first mutinies in the High Seas Fleet had erupted on 27 October. Sailors, many of them former workers who had been drafted into the imperial navy's 'floating factories', as German battleships were known because of their heavy machinery, refused to leave the harbour for a final assault on the British navy. They saw it as a suicide mission and refused the orders of their superiors. A few days later, rebel sailors hoisted the red flag over the battleships and elected sailors' councils. There was no denying it any more: the Revolution was under way. The north was on the march, and Berlin followed. As Paul Eckert reflected later, 'We thought we would push but were instead pushed by the sailors' uprising'.¹⁶

Despite the unexpected mutinies, the Shop Stewards did not want to strike immediately. Information about the scale of the revolt was unclear and delayed due to censorship. Only rumours reached Berlin. New doubts had surfaced by the afternoon of 2 November: Would the workers go along with an uprising? The Stewards were also unsure of the mood in the provinces and the inclinations of Berlin's troops. Müller and his comrades would only consider the time right for revolt if the troops' loyalty had eroded to the point that they would not open fire on the insurgents. Their choice was clear: while their arsenal constituted something of a deterrent, it was definitely not up to a serious fight with the military. If they were going to prevent a bloodbath, a premature strike would have to be avoided at all costs.

At another secret meeting on the evening of 2 November, the illegal 'workers' council' decided that the uprising would begin not on the 4th but the 11th despite intense pressure to the contrary from Liebknecht. The group was ner-

¹⁵ For more on the plans for the revolt, see Karl Feierabend's *Erinnerungen*, LArch Berlin, C Rep 902-02-04, no. 41; Müller 1924a, pp. 173f; and Wilhelm Pieck's report in: Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB 1960, pp. 366–8.

¹⁶ Paul Eckert, *Erinnerungen*, LArch Berlin, C Rep 902-02-04, no. 004. On the revolt of the German navy see also Jörg Berlin 1981.

vous. In the morning they had been in agreement on the earlier date, but negative reports about the mood in the factories had by evening divided them as they had rarely been divided before. This time many Stewards lined up with Liebknecht and pleaded to keep the date they had agreed on, while others warned against it. The decision to postpone was made with a slim majority of 22 votes to 19.¹⁷ Only the Shop Stewards were allowed to vote on that question, not the Spartacists and the USPD: few other facts reveal the Shop Stewards' leading role in the Revolution as this one.¹⁸ The Spartacists, of course, were not happy with the postponement. Their representative Wilhelm Pieck accused the Shop Stewards of 'lacking personal courage' and claimed that the negative reports had been all too convenient for certain meeting participants.¹⁹ The fact was that the situation had been genuinely unclear and few could be certain about the mood in Germany in November 1918. While some hoped the government would fall, others, including many leftists, could discern considerable anti-revolutionary sentiment in public opinion.²⁰

As the sailors' revolt grew, criticism of the delay grew increasingly loud despite the uncertainty. On 3 November, a representative of the 'red sailors' came to Berlin and gave the revolutionary group a first-hand report on developments in Kiel, but the Shop Stewards stood firm: the revolution in Berlin was scheduled for 11 November.²¹ Again and again, Müller and Barth rejected the idea of moving the date forward at the now almost daily secret meetings. Karl Liebknecht was beside himself with fury. He wrote into his diary: 'Since 3 November, every demand to move the action up has been met with the same reply: Everything is being prepared for November 11 and it is technically impossible to start the Revolution before that! All L[iebknecht]'s protests will ricochet

¹⁷ Müller 1924a, p. 173; Wilhelm Pieck's recollections in Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB 1960, pp. 366–8, and his 'Vorbereitungen für die Revolution', AdsD Bonn, NL Levi, box 142, file 285, p. 5. In the last manuscript, Richard Müller is identified as 'Comrade 2'. Ottokar Luban assumes Wilhelm Pieck to be the author of this unsigned text and not Levi due to its consistencies with later texts. I would like to thank Luban for pointing this out.

¹⁸ Jacob Walcher, a Spartacus League member at the time, also confirms this in his recollections: 'To my knowledge, the Berlin Workers' Council never had a significant role. It was the Revolutionary Shop Stewards who set the tone'. Jacob Walcher oral history interview file, BArch SAPMO, SG Y 30/1301, p. 235.

¹⁹ Wilhelm Pieck, *Vorbereitungen für die Revolution*, AdsD Bonn, NL Levi, box 142, file 285, p. 5.

²⁰ Luban 2008a, pp. 24ff.

²¹ Wilhelm Pieck, *Vorbereitungen für die Revolution*, AdsD Bonn, NL Levi, box 142, file 285, p. 6.

off of this rude-mechanical view until objective relations overrun these genius fabricators of revolution'.²²

On 8 November the Shop Stewards' collective judgment changed. Pieck and Liebknecht's annoyance was not altogether unjustified in light of the tumult around them and it was now undeniable that the Revolution was underway throughout Germany. A meeting was called on short notice, but the police discovered it and broke it up, arresting Ernst Däumig. It was a catastrophic turn of events given that Däumig had all of the revolutionaries' military plans with him in a briefcase. Lieutenant Walz, the Shop Stewards' contact in the military, had already been arrested on 4 November and they were afraid that he had talked to the police, and, as it later emerged, he had. The revolutionaries were under pressure to act. Their plans had come close to being upset twice already and their discovery was now only a matter of time – of hours now, not days.

In the meantime, news of Däumig's arrest spread rapidly by word of mouth. Instead of intimidating the conspirators, the effect was to unleash outrage among the working class. The government began to lose control.²³ In an impromptu meeting that evening, the Workers' Council finally decided to call the mass political strike for the following day. Richard Müller was plagued with serious doubts until the end. In one of the rare occasions in Müller's three-volume history of the Revolution where he writes in the first person, we get a glimpse into the deep structure of Müller's political commitments and orientation: on the evening of 8 November, when revolution came to be thrust upon the Shop Stewards, he reminisced:

I stood at the Hallesches Tor ... Heavily armed infantry columns, machine gun companies, and light field artillery passed me by in endless trains ... The men looked quite bold. They had been deployed in the east to put down the Russian workers and farmers and had met with success against Finland. There was no doubt that they would drown the people's revolution in blood in Berlin ... Now, as the decisive moment was approaching, I was seized by an oppressive feeling, a great worry for my class comrades, for the proletariat. Given the magnitude of the moment, I felt shamefully small and weak. No infallible leader will show the proletariat the path to follow.²⁴

²² Internationaler Arbeiter-Verlag (ed.) *Illustrierte Geschichte der Novemberrevolution*, Berlin 1929, p. 203; Ritter and Miller 1983, pp. 64–7.

²³ Wilhelm Pieck, *Vorbereitungen für die Revolution*, AdsD Bonn, NL Levi, box 142, file 285, pp. 7–10. Müller, pp. 173–7.

²⁴ Müller 1924a, pp. 178f. The very last sentence is based on one of Rosa Luxemburg's in *Die Krise der Sozialdemokratie* (The Crisis of German Social Democracy), first published in 1916 under the pseudonym Junius. See Luxemburg 2000.

Müller's worries proved unfounded. As the workers left their factories on the morning of 9 November and streamed to the barracks in droves, hardly a soldier was prepared to fire on them. Spontaneous fraternisation followed and red flags waved over barracks and ministries.

Philipp Scheidemann and Karl Liebknecht proclaimed the Republic – one calling it the German Republic and the other the Socialist Republic of Germany. It remained to be seen over the following weeks which one the workers' and soldiers' actions would realise. What was already clear, however, was that the imperial era had ended and the Revolution had won. The monarchists were beside themselves with rage at this sudden end of the Empire, as were some Social Democrats like Friedrich Ebert: his plans for a constitutional monarchy with a Social Democratic Chancellor Ebert too had come to naught.²⁵

In his novel *The Kaiser Goes: The Generals Remain*, Theodor Plivier created a literary memorial of that 9 November:

From Moabit a large body of armed men is already on the march – the soldiers released from the gaol, soldiers in fieldgrey and workers – all under the leadership of Richard Müller, former President of the Revolutionaries. Alongside him goes a man with a terribly thin, wasted face, whom Müller had never seen until an hour ago, when the two men together had set about organizing the procession. Now, together, they are leading it.

Richard Müller, the metal worker, had been reclaimed from the Front a few days ago to stand as parliamentary candidate for the Independent Party. The other had been employed addressing envelopes in a firm for the manufacture of taximeters. Having been wounded when a volunteer in the army he was, on convalescence, given a commission; later he had attempted to desert to the French, but finally gave himself up and was sentenced to imprisonment.

Richard Müller and Heinrich Dorrenbach are now leading their band into the city with the intention [of] occupying the Reichstag. At the Moltke Bridge they encounter a forgotten detachment of the Guards. The soldiers take no thought to defend the bridge, but fling their rifles into the Spree, while a few join the band of revolutionaries.

Thus unmolested they reach the Reichstag at last.

They enter amid cheers from the crowd, and in the lobby they halt.

²⁵ According to Philipp Scheidemann, Ebert described the possibility of the Kaiser's abdication as a 'fad among academics' in late October 1918 and angrily reprimanded Scheidemann on 9 November, saying that he had 'no right' to proclaim a republic. Scheidemann took that as evidence that Ebert had assured Prince Maximilian of Baden of the monarchy's survival. See Scheidemann 2002, pp. 89, 102.

Müller makes a short speech, telling them that whatever happened they must keep together and hold the Reichstag against all comers. He himself will go at once to the Independents and inform their committee of the existence of the troop. Dorrenbach is of the opinion that the first thing to be done is to find something to eat.

The soldiers pile arms, then stand looking blankly at the marble statue of Wilhelm I. A few sit down on the carpet. The sailors who came to Berlin this morning by lorry are still feeling the effects of the long night journey through the fog; they stretch out full length and try to sleep.

Not a soul is perturbed by this sudden bivouac.

A never-ending stream of traffic plies to and fro – deputies, journalists, soldiers, common people – through the lobby, the restaurant, the great assembly hall, up the stairs, along the corridors to the upper floor where are the party committee rooms.

In this room is a food committee, in that one a welfare committee. Here commissions are in session, the reason of whose existence is unknown; they shortly dissolve again or migrate to yet other rooms. Room 18 contains the committee of the Independents; Room 15 the Social Democrats; and in a room alongside is a meeting of soldiers' delegates...²⁶

Having been defeated in an election, Richard Müller now entered the portals of power as a revolutionary.

Plivier used extensive source materials and interviewed numerous eyewitnesses for his 1932 novel and this scene is modelled partly on Müller's recollections of the march on the Reichstag in a footnote of his history of the Revolution. In it, Müller also records how many other parliamentarians were clearly alarmed by the invasion of the Reichstag by motley-armed revolutionaries and 'scurried away, white as sheets'.²⁷ Plivier's portrayal of the Revolution as somewhat chaotic was justified. Although Emil Barth later claimed that the Revolution had been directed entirely by himself from the back room of a pub, most of the actions were in fact uncoordinated, spontaneous and improvised. Müller's description may be more realistic: 'On the day of the uprising, no lead-

²⁶ Plivier 1933, pp. 341ff. The long quotation is from the English translation: Theodor Plivier, *The Kaiser Goes: The Generals Remain*, translated by A.W. Wheen, Macmillan, New York, 1933, pp. 334–5. Plivier's novel was banned by the Nazis a year after it was published.

²⁷ Müller 1924b, p. 16.

ership was necessary. It would have been technically impossible. Everyone had to act at their own discretion as the situation required.²⁸

The Revolution was not entirely without structure, however. According to historian Ottokar Luban,

The Revolutionary Shop Stewards' systematic preparation for the uprising was critical, particularly their weapons procurement. For one thing, it intensified the insurgents' self-consciousness against the power of the old regime, which was still visible on the streets of Berlin on November 8 and on the morning of November 9. The plans, which were reviewed many times with union workplace representatives, provided for a relatively systematic action by the demonstrators after the call to action went out and gave it a definite structure for a few hours.²⁹

The Revolution was astonishingly bloodless to begin with, claiming only a few victims on 9 November. Seven of them were buried on 20 November in the Märzgefallenen cemetery in the Volkspark Friedrichshain: the revolutionaries of 1918 insisted on laying their dead to rest alongside those of the Revolution of 1848.³⁰ But the ceremony started on the Tempelhofer Feld, a parade ground where later the Tempelhof airport would be built. The funeral procession passed through the streets of Berlin in an enormous march with several hundred thousand mourners. Richard Müller gave a funeral address at the start of the service and Emil Barth and Karl Liebknecht spoke later in Friedrichshain. One of the few surviving photos of Müller shows him at the ceremony in Tempelhof. Wearing his Sunday best and a hat, he is standing next to Friedrich Ebert in a large crowd, his face looking exhausted and haggard behind his thick round glasses and trim moustache. He had not been home or seen his family for weeks out of fear that he would be followed by the police and military.³¹ He had been plagued by fears and doubts about the success of the actions until the very end. These uncertainties, the constant back and forth between secret

²⁸ Müller 1924a, p. 16. Emil Barth, who was by this time estranged from Müller, denied Müller's role in the storming of the Reichstag, surmising that Müller must have arrived at 'headquarters' only at noon and claiming further that he disappeared soon afterward with the words, 'I'm going to get something to eat now and I'll look into a little revolution afterwards!' Barth 1919, pp. 56f. See also Ryder 1967.

²⁹ Luban 2008a, p. 26.

³⁰ The Friedhof der Märzgefallenen is in Berlin-Friedrichshain. It was damaged in WWII and has undergone several renovations since then, but still exists as a memorial to both the revolutions of 1848 and 1918.

³¹ Luban 2008a, p. 26.



Richard Müller at the Revolutionary Funeral, 20 November, 1918 (middle, wearing glasses).

BY KIND PERMISSION OF THE ARCHIVE OF KARL DIETZ VERLAG

meetings and discussions and having to live the underground life in constant fear of the police all took their toll on him. He was unable to relax even after the uprising because 9 November was not the end but only the beginning of the real revolution. All of those efforts are clearly visible in the photo dated 20 November 1918.

Council Power

The *Kaiserreich* lay in tatters on the first day of the Revolution, but a new state had yet to be constituted. Some of the Shop Stewards met that afternoon in the Reichstag where, by then, an assembly of soldiers' councils was meeting quite by chance and heatedly discussing the course of the Revolution amid the ubiquitous chaos. Finally, Emil Barth managed to take control of the assembly. Richard Müller spontaneously, 'without checking it thoroughly, responding to the need of the hour', drafted a proposal for the election of workers' and soldiers' councils throughout Berlin and for a meeting of their representatives in the Cirkus Busch the following afternoon.³² The proposal was accepted. This

³² The Cirkus Busch was a permanent circus building in the centre of Berlin that had housed the circus of the same name since 1895. It was chosen because it was one of the largest buildings available for an assembly. The building was demolished in the course of Albert

ended the power vacuum and a revolutionary government was elected. For the moment the Shop Stewards had the initiative.³³

In a parallel development, negotiations between the USPD and the SPD about the formation of a workers' government based on parties rather than workers' councils had begun in the back rooms of the Reichstag on the same day. Essentially, the SPD leadership, repelled by the very idea of revolution, was now trying to exert control over the revolutionary process by transforming it into a coalition of parties. The intention was to limit the influence of the emerging council movement which the Social Democrats saw as mere anarchy.

Despite great animosity between the leaders of the two parties, the USPD party chairman Hugo Haase's view that a joint government was necessary ultimately prevailed in the negotiations at the Reichstag. Each group was allowed to name its own cabinet delegates without interference from the other caucus. While the USPD proved ready to cooperate with the leaders of the 'war socialists', contradicting their former party line, Müller and Liebknecht refused to support such a government.³⁴ They would have liked to keep the SPD out of the process altogether, but were unable to do so – not only moderates such as Haase, but also rank and file of both parties demanded worker's unity. So Karl Liebknecht, with the support of Richard Müller and Emil Barth, pushed through an agreement that all executive, legislative, and judicial power would be held by the workers' and soldiers' councils. This amendment was designed to limit the power of the interim government and keep it from suffocating the Revolution. So now, a new government, including three representatives each from the SPD and the USPD was to be constituted. It would be called the 'Council of People's Deputies' (*Rat der Volksbeauftragten*) and formally elected a day later in the meeting at Cirkus Busch. Whether and how it would be subordinated to the workers' councils, however, remained to be seen.

While accepting the council republic for the moment, the SPD, given its fundamentally liberal-bourgeois conception of democracy, insisted that only a national assembly could decide on the definitive character of the new

Speer's planning for 'Germania', a renewed capital city befitting the Third Reich, and never rebuilt after the war. The circus itself, however, still performs in a mobile tent under the name Cirkus Busch-Roland. Winkler 1998.

³³ Müller 1924b, pp. 32ff.

³⁴ See Bernstein 1921, pp. 32–5, as well as Paul Blumenthal's report in *Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB* 1960, p. 121.

constitution.³⁵ To them the revolutionary councils could only seem a source of unrest and chaos.³⁶

And there was ample chaos in the days following the German Revolution, as Plivier's extensively researched novel attested. Paul Blumenthal's recollections of what followed when a group of soldiers found themselves in possession of a truckload of banknotes amid the USPD-SPD coalition negotiations in the Reichstag offer one of the more absurdist illustrations of this chaos:

Afterward I returned to the caucus room where I found Comrade Vogtherr, the secretary of our caucus in the USPD, in distress. A group of soldiers had commandeered a whole truckload of banknotes and dumped the money in the USPD caucus room. Comrade Vogtherr asked me, 'What should we do with it?' We didn't know either and finally we decided to put all of the money in a safe in the central bank. My job was then to ensure that the money was transported safely. So we brought the money to the Reichsbank and I would like to say now that we were absolute idiots for giving all of that wonderful money back to the capitalists. At the time we thought that we had the power and the bank belonged to us. That was a colossal mistake. Nothing belonged to us and – as before, the capitalists had the power.³⁷

Trucks full of money in the hands of mutinying soldiers – of course situations like that were a nightmare for Social Democratic parliamentarians and union officials, who had worked for years in Germany's parliaments, state assemblies, public healthcare institutions, and industrial courts and could hardly imagine political change as anything other than a slow and orderly process. At the same time, this episode shows how the revolutionaries of 9 November underestimated the staying power of the state apparatus. It was a misunderstanding that would contribute to the failure the Revolution.

35 Letter from the executive board of the SPD to the executive board of the USPD dated 9 November, 1918, 8:30 PM; *Vorwärts*, 10 November 1918, reprinted in: Ritter and Miller 1983, pp. 89ff. The SPD would later reject the idea of revolutionary law altogether by insisting in a brief report in *Vorwärts* on 15 February 1919 that the government was only confirmed in the assembly in the Cirkus Busch and not elected by the workers' and soldiers' councils. This may have been technically correct, but it wrongly negated the councils' role as the actual bearer of the Revolution.

36 For more on the 'bourgeoisification' of the SPD, see Klönne 1989, pp. 119–25, 160.

37 Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB 1960, pp. 119f.

The State of the Revolution

Elections for a revolutionary administration and some form of central council to represent the multitude of unorganised local and shop-floor councils were scheduled for 10 November, in accordance with the proposals Müller had hastily prepared the previous day. However, 10 November was a Sunday and this gave a fateful twist to the elections. The workers could not be balloted in their workplaces: they were out on the streets. However, the revolutionary but completely politically inexperienced soldiers were in the barracks and the majority Social Democrats knew it. On 9 November, the SPD printed thousands of leaflets and distributed them on military bases around Berlin to win the soon-to-be-elected soldiers' councils over to their side. High-ranking Social Democrats personally campaigned among the soldiers and agitated to form soldiers' councils under the leadership of SPD Reichstag members.³⁸ The day before, moreover, before the outbreak of the Revolution, the party had also created a 'workers' and soldiers' council' of loyal workers and unionists that called for 'peace and order'. And, to top it all, the SPD issued a pathetic call for unity in *Vorwärts* on 10 November. The call, under the headline '*Kein Bruderkampf*', No Fighting among Brothers, fit the euphoric mood of both the workers and soldiers from the front. With one stroke, the SPD managed to whitewash four years of wartime deprivation and bitter disagreements.³⁹ By contrast, the board of the USPD made no attempt to influence the creation of councils – a serious oversight, as would later become apparent. The Spartacus League, for its part, prepared only one leaflet. According to Wilhelm Pieck, the group was simply 'numerically too weak to be able to engage in extensive agitation'.⁴⁰

The fact that the proposal for the creation of workers' and soldiers' councils hastily drafted by Müller on the previous day 'without checking thoroughly' was quite imprecise made it easier for the SPD majority to spread its influence. Müller's proposal said nothing specific about the way that the councils would be elected other than that there should be one delegate for every 1,000 employees. And this rule did not apply to the military in any case. Nor were there any specific details about the municipalities of Greater Berlin apart from the traditional six inner city districts which made up the city of Berlin technically: what should happen in the larger metropolitan area, including the huge industrial areas and working class neighbourhoods outside the formal city limits,

³⁸ Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, p. xvi, pp. xxiiif.

³⁹ Müller-Franken 1928, p. 62. See also Kluge 1975, p. 87 as well as Müller 1925b, pp. 34f.

⁴⁰ Wilhelm Pieck, *Vorbereitungen für die Revolution*, AdsD Bonn, NL Levi, box 142, file 285, p. 16.

was not specified.⁴¹ Worse, credentials were not checked at the assembly in Cirkus Busch, whether due to unclear rules or lack of time. As Paul Blumenthal reported, 'Identification checking was very poor and extremely inadequate to the point that anyone with a scrap of paper to show could get in'.⁴² Thus it was that the Cirkus Busch assembly was ultimately made up of 3,000 people, with soldiers constituting a majority.

Though Richard Müller, Emil Barth, and First Lieutenant Walz, the Shop Stewards' military adviser, presided, the Shop Stewards were not able to dominate the assembly and impose their ideas. The SPD's better preparation and, in particular, the overarching slogan of workers' unity, prevented the Shop Stewards from realising their conception of a revolutionary state based on councils. They had planned to realise this by appointing an 'action committee' made up exclusively of Spartacists and Shop Stewards as the highest organ of the revolution. They had intended it, as an organ of the councils, to subordinate the new representative government in accordance with the agreement that Liebknecht and Müller had won at the previous day's Reichstag meeting to the effect that state power should rest with the councils, not with the coalition between the USPD and the SPD. Instead, packed with SPD supporters, the Cirkus Busch assembly rejected the slate for the action committee that the Shop Stewards proposed and demanded a different peak council organ with equal representation from the USPD and the SPD. Müller and Barth protested passionately against this idea. Emil Barth told the entire assembly that it could 'go to hell' if 'the people who are going to be on the workers' council are going to be the same people we kicked out of the shops with Browning guns yesterday morning'. According to Wilhelm Pieck, he even threatened, 'to put a bullet through his head rather than work with the government socialists'. But that outburst only unleashed more opposition, particularly among the soldiers' councils.⁴³

⁴¹ Until 1920, Berlin consisted only of its six inner city districts; all of the other present-day districts were independent municipalities. These districts were incorporated in 1920 giving Berlin its present dimensions. The 'Greater Berlin' (Groß-Berlin) of 1918 is therefore more or less identical with the present-day city limits.

⁴² See Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB 1960, p. 120. Contemporary witness, Gustav Milkuschütz, claimed that, 'When I was at the entrance and noticed that several party and union employees who were SPD members were also getting in, I asked them, "Who gave you a mandate of 1,000 workers' votes?" They turned deathly pale after that but they joined the assembly anyway'. Gustav Milkuschütz oral history interview file, BArch SAPMO, SG Y 30/0639, p. 18.

⁴³ Vollversammlung der Arbeiter und Soldatenräte im Cirkus Busch', p. 21, in Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, pp. 15–24. Wilhelm Pieck, *Vorbereitungen für die Revolution*, AdsD Bonn, NL Levi, box 142, file 285, p. 18.

After the soldiers' councils threatened to boycott the assembly, creating a tumultuous scene, no action committee was elected and an Executive Council of Greater Berlin Workers' and Soldiers' Councils⁴⁴ with seven SPD representatives and seven USPD representatives was elected. While the new council, which would come to be known simply as the 'Executive Council', constituted a defeat for the Shop Stewards' plan for an 'action committee', all was not lost: six of the USPD representatives were Revolutionary Stewards and the seventh was their supporter, Georg Ledebour. In addition to these workers' delegates, the council had 14 seats for soldiers' delegates. The council was headed by Richard Müller as principal chairman. The position of second chairman was initially held by a soldier's delegate named von Beerfelde who was replaced three days later by the Social Democrat, Brutus Molkenbuhr.⁴⁵ The people who were elected and even the number of members would change constantly over the coming weeks – but majority always eluded Müller and the USPD representatives because the politically inexperienced soldiers' councils usually sided with the SPD.

The 'Council of People's Deputies' consisting of Friedrich Ebert, Philipp Scheidemann, and Otto Landsberg for the SPD and Hugo Haase and Wilhelm Dittmann for the USPD, formed in the previous day's negotiations, was installed as the new government. Emil Barth set aside his suicide plans and joined the government as the third USPD representative.⁴⁶ At the SPD's insistence, civil servants of the preceding imperial government, including many department heads, remained as 'technical assistants' to the deputies in office, although their ostensibly apolitical nature would soon prove fictitious.

Despite all these setbacks, Richard Müller and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards had now risen from their erstwhile existence as a clandestine oppositional organisation to the highest offices of government. As the co-chairman of the Executive Council who actually chaired its meetings, Richard Müller was now the head of state under revolutionary law, given that the Executive Council, as the highest organ of Germany's councils, controlled state power.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ In German: Groß-Berliner Vollzugsrat der Arbeiter und Soldatenräte.

⁴⁵ Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, p. 42. See also Materna 1978, p. 35

⁴⁶ The minutes of the government of the People's Deputies are documented in the edition *Die Regierung der Volksbeauftragten*, Miller and Potthoff 1969.

⁴⁷ See the Weimar Republic organisational chart by Elmar Geus, available online at: [http://www.derhistoriker.de/weimar/99+Struktogramm_Weimar_Republik_\(big\).pdf](http://www.derhistoriker.de/weimar/99+Struktogramm_Weimar_Republik_(big).pdf) (accessed on September 12, 2012); on the Executive Council's claim to being highest organ of the council system, see also Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, p. xxvii.

The Shop Stewards had fallen short of their goal, however, and were not able to actually dominate the revolutionary government; the experienced USPD and SPD party leaders largely determined events instead. The improvised course of the Revolution, the poorly prepared assembly in the Cirkus Busch and the Shop Stewards' inexperience as party operatives left the Shop Stewards unable to counter the SPD's mobilisation and propaganda. Moreover, despite all their influence among industrial workers, the Shop Stewards' leaders were almost unknown to the general public. Until then, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were the only well-known faces of the radical left. But Luxemburg was still in prison when the Revolution occurred and Liebknecht had utterly refused to enter a government with the SPD.⁴⁸ The advance of the politically unknown Emil Barth, and the excessive willingness of his USPD comrades, Haase and Dittmann, to compromise, allowed Ebert and his colleagues to dominate the Council of People's Deputies in the following weeks and to steer the Revolution toward a moderate course. Although the Executive Council, and Richard Müller and its USPD caucus in particular, worked hard to assert their authority against the Council of People's Deputies, they were not able to reverse the loss of initiative they suffered at Cirkus Busch. It would prove fateful.

48 At first he considered provisional three-day participation, but then refused to join the government. See Laschitz 2007, p. 391.

CHAPTER 6

Chairman of the Berlin Executive Council: 1918–19

Richard Müller's chairmanship of the Berlin Executive Council confronts us with the vexing fact that the Stewards found it easier to start a revolution than to keep it in motion. They had overthrown the old capitalist and imperial state, but seemed unprepared to replace it with a Socialist Republic of Germany – the title that the Executive Council used for its proclamations. The Stewards' lack of a coherent political vision and pressure from the workers to restore unity with their former opponents in the SPD both contributed to paralysing the Revolution at a very early stage. By analysing Müller's role in the Executive Council, this chapter will try to explain how he and the Revolutionary Stewards who had played such a decisive role in the revolutionary events lost initiative to an SPD closely allied to still-powerful remnants of the *ancien régime*. It focuses exclusively on the political fortunes of the Executive Council and of Müller and his fellow council members, leaving the discussion of the theoretical and practical development and mutation of the council principle to the next chapter.

Though technically the Executive Council was the highest body of the revolution, and Müller was its chairman, the body was sidelined within weeks by the six-member Council of People's Deputies and its informal strongman Friedrich Ebert, who had the support of both the military and the old state apparatus. Müller and the current of revolutionary workers that supported his ideas failed to realise this, both overestimating their revolutionary influence, particularly outside Berlin and among unorganised workers, while underestimating the ability of the old powers to reorganise in a changed political environment. As we have seen, the idea of council power had already been sidelined when the first institutions of the Revolution were constituted. The assembly at Cirkus Busch rejected the idea of an action committee representing workers' and soldiers' councils and opted instead for an Executive Council based on equal representation of the main workers' parties, the SPD and the USPD.

As this chapter shows, in the weeks to follow, this would weaken the position of the Shop Stewards and other proponents of council power when it came to the decisive struggle over the respective competencies of the Executive Council and the Council of People's Deputies. It was decided against the Executive Council on 23 November when it was agreed that henceforth the

Executive Council would just ‘oversee’ the government. Even such oversight was transferred to a new ‘Central Council of the Socialist Republic of Germany’ when a first national congress of workers’ councils convened on 16 December. With this, the Executive Council had ceased to be the supreme organ of the Revolution after less than six weeks.¹ That position was taken by the Council of People’s Deputies, the six-member body composed of SPD and USPD deputies, because the Central Council turned out to be only a sham body which never used its powers.

The Executive Council now was reduced to the representation of workers in the Greater Berlin area. It lost the soldiers due to demobilisation, but was able to develop an intricate system of local council democracy by the beginning of 1919. However, this development came too late: the crucial weeks that the council system had needed to grow from the inevitably initial phase of improvisation and idealism into a working political practice had been used by a coalition of the SPD, the military and the old state apparatus to consolidate their grip on power. Despite these setbacks, the Executive Council did regain local influence in Berlin in a general strike in March 1919 before being dissolved by military intervention in the summer of 1919. But this course of events was not foreseeable in November 1918, when the air was full with revolutionary fervour.

Conflict, Caution and Counter-revolution

After it was constituted on 10 November 1918, the Executive Council of Greater Berlin Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils met in the prestigious Prussian state parliament on Prinz-Albrecht Strasse in Berlin (today the seat of Berlin’s state parliament). It formally represented all the revolutionary councils in Germany and therefore claimed precedence over the Council of People’s Deputies. With the formal authority to monitor and dissolve the Council of People’s Deputies, the Executive Council was the highest authority in the provisional ‘Socialist Republic of Germany’.

However, the actual working of the Executive Council was considerably less lofty than this implied. By the time it lost its status as the revolution’s highest body, it had become mired in irrelevant details because of the paralysing political differences within it, some members’ incompetence, a fear of overly hasty

¹ For more on the Executive Council, see Materna 1978 and the introductions to the three-volume edition of the Executive Council documents in: Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, 1997 and 2002. For records and description of the Central Council, see Kolb 1968.

socialisation measures, lack of armed forces to protect the revolutionary councils and, above all, the working class's politically unclear objectives. Moreover, Richard Müller, the Executive Committee's Chairman, also shared the Social Democrats' fear of economic collapse, energetically opposed so-called 'wild socialisation', and not only limited the powers of workers' councils to 'audit' their employers but also failed to give them a means to actually implement even that limited power against the inevitable resistance.² Müller's economic caution even led him to plead for the reintroduction of piecework at an AEG company meeting – an act that would cost him considerable rank-and-file support.³

But most importantly, this caution prevented him from countering the delaying tactics of the Social Democrats in alliance with the bourgeoisie against the socialisation measures that were proposed in the Executive Council.

Progress on socialisation also faced other obstacles, including the difficult relationship between the new council structures and long-established union structures. Preparation for socialisation and even representation of workers' interests in socialised units had been left to the unions and companies could play unions and councils against each other.⁴ The unions were still dominated by their social democratic and business-friendly bureaucracy and, within the structures of the Executive Council, this bureaucracy had many allies. For instance, the Executive Council decided to place elections to workers' councils under union oversight, impairing the independence of the councils. Müller criticised this decision, but was unable to overturn it. Instead, on 23 November 1918, the Executive Council adopted the following formula: 'To safeguard workers' economic interests, the works councils must reach an understanding with the unions'.⁵ It ignored the unions' business-friendly orientation and their competitive relationship with the revolutionary councils.

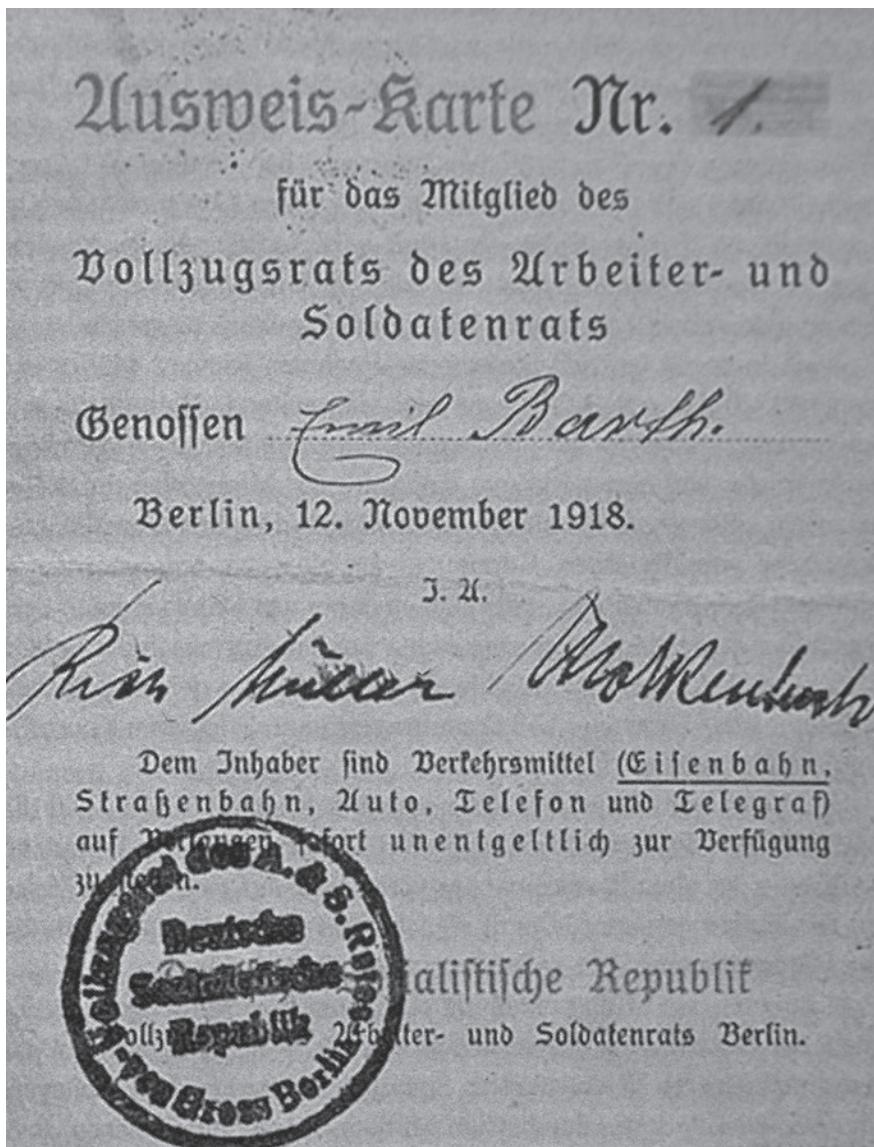
Caution also plagued the attitude of Richard Müller and the USPD caucus in the Executive Council towards the state apparatus. Although it had long demanded the removal of compromised ministers and the effective control of the ministries by the workers' councils, the USPD did not seriously oppose the considerable continuity of the *ancien régime* in large parts of the state

² Müller 1924b, p. 107. Peter von Oertzen notes that many instances of what Müller and the social democrats called 'wild' socialisation were, in fact, quite sensible and accomplished by independent initiative. See von Oertzen 1976, p. 132.

³ See Jacob Weber's recollections in Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB 1960, p. 459, as well as Erich Rochler's oral history interview file, BArch SAPMO, SG Y 30/ 0985, p. 24.

⁴ Materna 1978, pp. 110–11.

⁵ Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der SED 1958b, pp. 461, 400, and 449.



Permit of the Executive Council signed by Richard Müller, 1918.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

apparatus such as the courts, local government and low-level ministerial bureaucracies once top level officials were replaced. And even at the top they were not able to counter the People's Deputies' support for many bourgeois civil servants.⁶ Fear of chaos and collapse thus meant that the complete dissolution of the old state apparatus was, at best, postponed to a later phase of the Revolution, making the restoration engineered by the bourgeoisie and the SPD leadership easier.

Where Müller did unambiguously question the old power structure, with regard to weapons, for instance, he and the Executive Council met internal and external resistance. The internal majority was always against Müller and his comrades and the councils' power outside the Executive Council was increasingly deteriorating.

Though on 12 November the Executive Council unanimously agreed to establish a Red Guard to defend the Revolution,⁷ it was forced to retreat the next day by pressure from the soldiers' representatives, who had been won over by a joint campaign of Social Democrats and the military leadership to portray a Red Guard as a competing organisation and its creation as a vote of no confidence in soldiers.⁸ With that, the Executive Council and the Revolution lost an important power base, if not the decisive one. Soldiers and sailors had triggered the Revolution: it was their refusal to follow orders that had initially made it possible. Although the working class and socialist intellectuals bore the revolutionary ideas and pushed events forward, without the support of the soldiers, the Revolution was on shaky ground.

This was clear from the number of Executive Council plans that failed due to resistance from soldier representatives and the Social Democrats who had managed to win their loyalty. Their paralysing influence in the Executive Council corresponded to conditions in the country at large. The German working class was divided into two groups – one was interested in radicalising or at least securing the achievements of the Revolution. It was represented by the Spartacus League, the USPD, the Shop Stewards, and their followers. Most rank-and-file social democrats also supported the Revolution, though in a more moderate version. But the SPD leadership was strongly opposed to the Revolution as such, and especially to the 'chaos' of the councils. They formed a coalition of order with the military and the old state apparatus. The institutional mind-set of many German socialists, in particular their strongly held

6 See Materna 1978, p. 54, p. 128.

7 'Aufruf des Vollzugsrates zur Bildung einer Roten Garde vom 12.11.1918', in Ritter and Miller 1983, pp. 102ff.

8 Materna 1978, p. 67.

belief in the unity of the labour movement, worked to obscure the fact that the failure of the Revolution was in substantial part due to the leaders of the unions and the SPD continuing their long-standing cooperation with the military and the old powers.

The Executive Council's failure was, therefore, the failure of the Revolution itself and, for all his frequent vacillations, it was less a matter of Richard Müller's personal deficiencies or indecisiveness than some Marxist-Leninist depictions have suggested.⁹

Thanks to the Executive Council's paralysis, it was the Council of People's Deputies that decided on the course of the revolution, and it decided against the council system. The fact that in Emil Barth, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards had a deputy in the Council could not change things – Barth was the only radical. His USPD-colleagues, Haase and Dittmann, followed a moderate course.¹⁰ So the Council of Peoples' Deputies became dominated by the SPD in fact if not in numbers. In addition, its key figure, Friedrich Ebert, was supported by the officials of the vestigial Wilhelmine state. Ebert also had access to the imperial army's remaining forces through a secret alliance with General Groener.

Two weeks after the Revolution the dominance of the People's Deputies was made official. When responsibilities were clarified and redistributed within the council system on 23 November 1918, the Berlin Executive Council had to officially concede executive power to the People's Deputies. This decision was crucial; it was only the atmosphere of improvisation and revolutionary ferment that prevented most from seeing it as a definitive shift of power. Müller and the other Council members reserved for themselves the 'most extensive oversight powers' over the Council of People's Deputies, thinking that this oversight would allow them to regain control if the Council should abandon the revolutionary process.¹¹ But in reality that authority went unused. In this state of political flux, a serious effort to displace the initially quite popular SPD-USPD unity government would have required a new revolution. The Spartacist uprising would attempt just that in January 1919, only to end in a fiasco for the revolutionary left.

⁹ For example, Drabkin 1968; and Materna 1978. The introductions to the documentation of the Executive Council's records in Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993–2002 offer a different assessment.

¹⁰ See Barth 1919.

¹¹ Institut für Marxismus Leninismus, *Dokumente und Materialien zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, series 2, vol. 2, Berlin (DDR) 1957, p. 465.

In addition to the loss of the radicals' influence within the Executive Council, it became bogged down in conflicts between the SPD, USPD and soldiers' representatives. To make things more complex, majorities changed continuously, particularly because the SPD often withdrew delegates and nominated new ones. Later, when proportional elections were introduced in 1919, other parties such as the KPD and liberal Democrats joined the council. All in all, steady work was hardly possible.¹² The meetings were often dominated by endless, usually pointless discussions that obscured fundamental political issues. Paul Blumenthal, who was involved with the Executive Council as Müller's secretary, derided the committee as a 'debating society' that was perpetually in session.¹³ After attending an Executive Council meeting in December 1918, Social Democrat Heinrich Schäfer described a typical scene:

Richard Müller keeps a firm grip [as chairman of the Executive Council]...He complains for the umpteenth time that the People's Deputies in the government do not give the Executive Council the respect it deserves. Reaction raises its boorish head again and Ebert is widely suspected of planning a coup. That provides Ledebour with sufficient reason to give his ninety-ninth speech against the 'counterrevolution'...He doesn't skimp on the verbal assaults... He considers Ebert and Scheidemann complete traitors. When Hermann Müller intervenes, Ledebour, irritated by the interruptions, yells all sorts of pleasantries in his face. Red with anger, he leans back in his armchair. Ledebour, who now stands more than he sits, wants to get his hands on [Hermann] Müller but is prevented by the chairman, who has a thing for order. And now Cohen follows by trying to smooth things over with an oily speech.¹⁴

Talk of a coup was not far-fetched. On 6 December, a group of officers had tried to arrest the Executive Council and declare Friedrich Ebert president of the republic. The coup leaders had printed a leaflet claiming that the 'traitorous,

¹² The various expansions prior to the National Workers' and Soldiers' Congress thoroughly strengthened the SPD's position. See Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, pp. xxx ff., xxxvii. On the other personnel changes, see also vol. II, pp. xii ff. and vol. III, p. x ff.

¹³ Paul Blumenthal's report in Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB 1960, p. 121.

¹⁴ Schäfer 1919, cited in Müller 1924b, p. 162. Hermann Müller-Franken commented that Schäfer, 'with his Cologne roots had a carnivalesque view of things, only seeing "cockfighting" and having no eye for politics'. Müller-Franken 1928, p. 107. Schäfer was an Executive Council delegate from the Cologne Workers' Council. See Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, vol. I, p. xxxvi.

incompetent, and fraudulent' Executive Council had to be arrested because it placed the 'future of the German people' in such danger that only a fortnight stood between Berlin and 'hunger, destitution, epidemics, and negroes'.¹⁵ Only the immediate convening of a national assembly 'as a Christmas gift to the young Republic' could prevent such an outcome. The references to 'negroes' were directed at French and British colonial soldiers, who would be a danger to the 'purity' of the German People, ethnicised as 'Volk', if they were to occupy Berlin. Such racism was no coincidence but common in the counterrevolutionary propaganda; anti-Semitism was also invoked at similar occasions.¹⁶ It should be noted that despite the reaction and dilettantism of the coup-makers, Ebert did not distance himself from them until it finally became apparent that the plan had collapsed.¹⁷

Such events showed that the Social Democratic advocates of a national assembly considered the Executive Council an obstacle or, at best, a provisional arrangement. This attitude naturally did little to improve the atmosphere in the Executive Council. Nor did a discussion between the Executive Council and the government on 7 December – meant to clarify mutual responsibilities – help matters.¹⁸

Though Richard Müller worked courageously to pass meaningful resolutions in the Executive Council in the spirit of the Revolution, he recalled the tragic-comedy of his efforts with characteristically ironic self-distance in his history of the Revolution: 'When the most explosive debates about political differences or relations with the Deputies had been raging for hours, when nerves were shot and the spirit was no longer capable of grasping anything, Richard Müller would make his proposals. As things stood in the Executive Council, there was no other way to do it if something was to be salvaged for the Revolution'.¹⁹

Such circumstances were hardly propitious for good decision-making. Hermann Müller-Franken, Social Democratic member of the Executive Council and later chancellor of Germany, described the decisions of the Executive Council as 'small-minded string pulling' and denied that Richard Müller had 'any capacity' to be leader of such an important body.²⁰ This dismissive view was expressed after Müller had graciously thanked Müller-Franken

¹⁵ Flyer reproduced in Müller 1924b, p. 171.

¹⁶ See also the flyer from 'Bund der Kaisertreuen', in Müller 1924b, pp. 294f.

¹⁷ See Richard Müller 1924b, pp. 165–75 and Winkler 1984, pp. 97f.

¹⁸ Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, pp. 616ff.

¹⁹ Müller 1924b, pp. 109f.

²⁰ Müller-Franken 1928, pp. 108, 111.

and his fellow Social Democratic Council members, Cohen and Heller, for their cooperation upon their departure from the council in December 1918. It only underlines how ineffective were Müller's efforts 'to always demonstrate a non-existent Executive Council unity' so that the council's authority would appear strong.²¹ Müller was also generally averse to polarisation and tended to delegate the settlement of disputes to committees. Though he tried to make collaboration among the different caucuses easier in the middle-term, in the long-term, these efforts contributed to the council's indecisiveness. Under such circumstances, the Executive Council was unable to establish real control over the government, coalesce as an organisation, or consolidate the council's heterogeneous structures.²²

Loss of National Power

Given all this, it was more or less inevitable that the Executive Council would lose its national responsibilities at the first National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils held in Berlin's Prussian state parliament (Landtag) building on 16 December. The council congress was an assembly of council delegates from the whole country, elected in a more orderly fashion than the councils improvised in November. It had greater formal legitimacy, and a majority of SPD-Delegates. When it elected a new Central Council to take up the national responsibilities previously vested in the Executive Council, it effectively confined the Executive Council's authority to Berlin.

Though by this time the remaining powers of the Executive Council were limited to vague rights to 'oversee' the government of the People's Deputies, the USPD was furious at this. It made the tactical error of boycotting the Central Council elections and, as a result, the new body came to be composed entirely of the Social Democrats. It gave Ebert and the Council of People's Deputies every freedom they wanted and never used its power to oversee the government and never acted as part of the council system. This denouement marked the end of the Executive Council's role as the bearer of state power of the Socialist Republic of Germany.²³

This would not, however, become clear for some time. Though, in view of the impending developments at the upcoming council congress, Richard Müller had declared at the 12 December meeting of the Executive Council that

²¹ Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, p. xli.

²² See *ibid.* On Müller's own assessment, see Müller 1924b, pp. 145–7, 151f.

²³ For an assessment of this committee, see Kolb 1968.

for him it was ‘quite simple’: ‘My job is done here on December 16 and then I go back to the lathe’,²⁴ after the transfer of authority to the Central Council, it became clear that the Executive Council would continue to be the highest organ of the revolution in Greater Berlin at least, and Richard Müller remained at his post. The Executive Council was then reorganised and new elections to it were held by the Berlin General Assembly of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils in January 1919. From then on, equal representation of USPD and SPD gave way to proportional representation depending on the votes won by these two and other parties. In addition, the Executive Council became accountable to the Berlin General Assembly of Workers’ Councils.

The party composition of the Executive Council did not change much in the first election. However, large-scale power shifts did occur quite soon thanks to the radical democratic practice of holding new elections whenever a majority of workers wanted to as a way of ensuring that the councils did not lose touch with their base. After such elections were held in February, two delegates from the newly established Communist Party of Germany (KPD) were elected and, with the Shop Stewards who represented the USPD, they put the SPD in the minority against the left for the first time. This swing to the left intensified in spring 1919, producing a left majority in the now Berlin-bound Executive Council.

Given the council’s influence at the grassroots level, which was always the source of its authority, and its influence on industrial politics, the council gained in significance briefly when it assumed the leadership of the Berlin general strike in March 1919. But the strike was defeated without gains and brought no lasting benefit to the Executive Council. Thereafter, moreover, it had to contend with searches, arrests of its members, document seizures, and other government reprisals.²⁵

The SPD left the Executive Council on 16 July 1919 and created a rival social democratic Executive Council that included liberal democrats, leaving the USPD and KPD representatives to constitute a ‘red Executive Council’. While the SPD Executive Council disappeared after engaging in some desultory activities, the red Executive Council continued its work at a brisk pace despite increasing repression by military and state authorities. On 23 August it was violently dispersed by troops sent by SPD Defence Minister Gustav Noske, and evicted from its headquarters in a villa near Berlin’s Tiergarten.²⁶ It had already

²⁴ Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, p. 803.

²⁵ See Materna 1978, pp. 42–8.

²⁶ On the split in and dissolution of the Executive Council, see Engel, Holtz and Materna 2002, pp. xx ff. and Materna 1978, p. 226.

been forced to vacate its original home in the Prussian state parliament after a Prussian constituent assembly was elected. During the eviction from its new premises, its records and documents were destroyed. The only surviving ones were the private copies of Richard Müller.

After the eviction, *Vorwärts* mocked Richard Müller as a ‘bumbling populist’ and generally portrayed him as a petty tyrant in his conflicts with the Executive Council’s staff association. The bourgeois press was all too happy to devote space to this spat; it provided excellent material against any form of popular decision-making on the part of workers’ councils.²⁷ It is symptomatic of the Executive Council’s loss of significance that its dissolution was accompanied not by substantial political differences but by petty mockery.

The ‘red Executive Council’ continued working in a new office at Münzstrasse 24, focusing on organising the Berlin General Assembly of Workers’ Councils, until it was finally banned on 6 November 1919. After that, the red Executive Council met illegally, as did a version of the general assembly under the guise of ‘general officers’ meetings’.²⁸ The red Executive Council publicly reinstated itself on 7 December, only to be banned again. It surfaced one last time in a call for a demonstration against the Works Council Act, which was passed by the National Assembly on 13 February 1920. It limited the power of the Works Councils to representing workers on the shop-floor level, depriving them of any political authority. Though the name of the red Executive Council appeared on the call for protests against this legislation, the Council had, for all intents and purposes, ceased to exist by this point.

The political workers’ and soldiers’ councils were in general disarray long before the end of the Executive Council. After conscripted soldiers were demobilised, the new army had no councils. Workers, for their part, were completely preoccupied with protecting their interests in the workplace in the face of a new employers’ offensive, and Richard Müller and his comrades focused on these struggles.²⁹ The revolutionary political workers’ councils based on the territorial districts of Berlin had ceased to exist – dismissed or sometimes forcefully dissolved. However, workplace councils, which would now be called ‘Works Councils’, had remained quite active, particularly in the larger companies. A Works Council Central Committee (Betriebsrätezentrale) developed out of the Executive Council and became the new forum for the council movement

²⁷ See *Vorwärts*, no. 429, August 23, 1919; *Berliner Tageblatt* August 28, 1919; and Müller’s response in *Die Freiheit*, August 30, 1919.

²⁸ Jakob Weber oral history interview file, BArch SAPMO, SG Y 30 / 0985, p. 47. It is unclear whether this statement refers to the August or the December prohibition phase or both.

²⁹ Morgan 1975, p. 268.

in mid-1919. It was based in Münzstrasse, the red Executive Council's last office, and was led by Richard Müller.

Müller gave a touching verdict on the Executive Council when it lost national power in December 1918 and it serves as an epitaph for the Greater Berlin Executive Council of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils just as well:

The Executive Council, I admit, was poorly composed. I'm glad that those days, which were days of suffering for a political person [like me], are finally over. My friends and I tried to safeguard the Revolution. We did not lack the will, but we were overpowered by the circumstances. Even today... all political questions are in the end questions of power.³⁰

³⁰ Speech at the Allgemeiner Kongreß der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte Deutschlands vom 16. bis 21. Dezember 1918, see Zentralrat der deutschen sozialistischen Republik 1919, p. 18. An abbreviated English translation of Müller's speech can be found in Kuhn 2012, pp. 31–8.

CHAPTER 7

Richard Müller and the Council Movement: 1918–19

The German Revolution and its council movement cannot be judged solely on the basis of the experience of the Berlin Executive Council. While the Executive Council was stalemated between the USPD and the SPD, sidelined by the Council of People's Deputies and ultimately replaced at the national level by the Central Council, the council movement as a whole was much more vibrant. Demands for the democratisation of the postwar army and the socialisation of key industries as a first step toward some form of socialist economy were shared by a broad majority of workers in the council movement, which accounted for a majority of the working class and included the rank and file of the SPD. This chapter will outline the council movement as such and the attempts by Richard Müller and his fellow Shop Stewards to make it a coherent political project. This included developing a political theory of council socialism, which Müller and his friend Ernst Däumig did in 1919.

The chapter also explores the reasons why these attempts failed, at least in achieving their most radical goals. Even as Müller and Däumig were developing their council communist vision, a broad 'coalition of order' that included the military, the capitalist class, the state bureaucracy, and the Social Democratic Party wanted to abolish the councils altogether and secure the authority of a 'regular' parliament – the National Assembly. To Müller, the councils were the original representation of the working class. In the eyes of his opponents, the mass mobilisation, which turned every street and factory into a parliament, was 'pure anarchy', the opposite of politics. The councils' potential for a different structure of representation was opposed and suppressed by the coalition of traditional elites purporting to represent 'the people'.

The Council Movement in War and Revolution

What was the council movement about? Strike committees calling themselves 'workers' councils' had formed by spring of 1917. Berlin's January 1918 strike leadership likewise used that title, giving the council principle national exposure.¹ Richard Müller retrospectively claimed that already by 1917 the Shop Stewards

¹ Schneider and Kuda 1968, p. 25.

in Berlin were preparing ‘to stop the democratic state claptrap and establish a council republic based on the Russian model’.² It was unclear, however, just what a council system would look like. Ultimately, the councils did not develop along Russian lines but rather as spontaneous resistance organisations. Originally emerging because the traditional organs of the labour movement had failed during the decisive crisis of August 1914, councils became a new way for workers to represent their interests, and neither the Social Democratic Party nor the unions represented workers’ opposition to the war and the *Burgfrieden* any more. These councils were simply a new form of the labour movement’s democratic assembly traditions.³ But once peace had been won, the future of the councils was uncertain. An intense debate about Germany’s future arose in advance of the first national council congress in December 1918, focusing on a central issue: national assembly or council system? The USPD, including the Spartacus League and the Shop Stewards which had been part of this large umbrella organisation of anti-war socialists since 1917, advocated a council system which the SPD regarded as an abhorrent ‘state of lawlessness’,⁴ insisting on the early establishment of a national assembly which alone could ratify the future constitution.

The most decisive and best known advocates of the council system were Ernst Däumig and Richard Müller. Müller’s bold remarks made him a symbol of the council republicans. He categorically rejected the demand for a national assembly at a Berlin council assembly on 19 November 1918, declaring, ‘I have put my life on the line for the Revolution and I will do it again. A national assembly is a path to bourgeois rule, a path to struggle; the path to a national assembly will go over my dead body’.⁵ For the usually soft-spoken Müller, this was a rare grand gesture. While it made him a symbol of the council republicans, it also earned him the moniker *Leichenmüller* (Müller the Corpse), which, thanks to the efforts of the bourgeois and SPD press, would stick to him forever.⁶ The irony could not be heavier. Unlike Liebknecht, Müller was down to

² Müller 1924a, p. 175.

³ Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 327f.

⁴ SPD pamphlet, *Nur über meine Leiche*, without author credit, Vorwärts Verlag, Berlin 1918.

⁵ Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, pp. 154, 184. On the question of a national assembly, see also Richard Müller, ‘Democracy or Dictatorship’, in Kuhn 2012, pp. 59–76, and Ernst Däumig, ‘The National Assembly Means the Council’s Death’, in Kuhn 2012, pp. 40–51.

⁶ Vorwärts applied this derogatory nickname to Müller regularly over a long period. For example, a 24 September 1918 article dripped malice from its title as well as its content: ‘The Living Corpse’, stated, *inter alia*, that ‘Richard Leichenmüller has not justified his existence at all since entering the National Assembly. He must have committed hara-kiri long ago’. See also the above-mentioned pamphlet *Nur über meine Leiche*, Vorwärts publishing house, Berlin 1918.

earth, a stranger to ardour. Herrmann Müller-Franken, who was often opposed to Müller, mused that 'Müller was anything but vicious... Indeed, if he ever directed strong words against an opponent, his soft Saxon accent and idiom moderated the attack'.⁷ Müller's remarkably strong posture at the 19 November assembly indicated his commitment to the council system as the Revolution's achievement.

Müller's solitary gesture of vehemence was undoubtedly prompted by desperation: he was increasingly aware that his passion for a council republic was not shared by the councils themselves. After the Revolution, there was a widespread desire to re-unify the workers' parties that had been split by the war. A unified workers' party could then reclaim its traditional task of political organising from the councils. After all, the wartime divisions between the two types of working-class organisation no longer seemed to matter after the armistice. However, this desire for unity remained largely incognisant of the reality of the collaborationist stance of the bulk of the SPD and union leadership. It assumed that the SPD-dominated Council of People's Deputies would respect the workers' and soldiers' councils and act according to their wishes. So, though the councils were practically omnipotent in November 1918, they did not think it necessary to constitute themselves into a lasting state power.

And neither Richard Müller and the Shop Stewards nor the USPD succeeded in convincing the councils that they should do so. Indeed, they evinced a distinct political timidity in making this case. Fearing a collapse of the German economy, they claimed only oversight authority for the councils in both economic and political matters and did not act to assume power immediately as the Spartacus League urged.

The schism in the labour movement over the question of peace, moreover, obscured older fault lines between its revolutionary and reformist currents that did not become apparent either before or during the Revolution. They only began to emerge painfully *after* 9 November and ultimately resulted in the failure of the Revolution.

The First Council Congress and the Triumph of Parliamentarianism

As we have seen, the first council congress of 16 December brought together delegates from all the country's workers' and soldiers' councils for the first time in the Prussian state parliament building. Its agenda: the Revolution's future. Richard Müller gave the opening speech and reported on the Executive

⁷ Müller-Franken 1928, p. 92. The accent was more likely Thuringian given that that was the region where Müller grew up, but the two accents are very similar.

Council's work while Ernst Däumig presented a declaration of principles for maintaining the council system as the structure of the state.⁸

Müller's opening speech presciently warned that 'The battle of wits that will rage in these rooms today and in the coming days will be harsh and severe', and the mood was certainly heated.⁹ If that was not enough, the conference was repeatedly interrupted by demonstrations outside and frequent delegations demanding hearings for their various demands. The chief debate was whether the nascent council system or a future national assembly would be the form of the future German state. The front ran primarily between the Executive Council and the Council of People's Deputies even though both bodies included USPD and SPD members. But the Executive Council was paralysed and, in the Council of People's Deputies, only the independent Deputy Barth broke through that front and criticised the government for its inability, or unwillingness, to address the main questions of the Revolution, such as socialisation of industry. But Barth was the only radical there – his two independent colleagues, Dittmann and Haase, took the view that only a future national assembly could make legitimate decisions on the foundations of a new German state. This meant that high-ranking members of the revolutionary government were not interested in actually exercising revolutionary powers. Such passive institutionalism, which was certainly prevalent at the top of the USPD, could also be found among ordinary members of both SPD and USPD. This was evident in the proceedings of the first council congress, for example. Worker's delegates declared their support for socialisation of industry but were unwilling to make this task their own in their factories and workplaces, delegating it instead to the Government of People's Deputies or the National Assembly. This expectation that the revolution would be executed from above by a benevolent government was the most fundamental obstacle the German Revolution faced.

In his opening speech, Müller spent considerable time answering the array of charges made in the bourgeois press – of usurpation of office, incompetence and embezzlement – against the Executive Council. He himself had been accused of accepting 10,000 Marks.¹⁰ Such politically motivated accusations cut Müller close to the bone. Having spent the entire morning on lengthy explanations and repudiations, he only got to the real issues and to criticising the policies of the Council of People's Deputies, particularly their role in

⁸ The minutes of the first council congress are published in: Zentralrat der deutschen sozialistischen Republik 1919. Müller's speech has been translated into English. See Kuhn 2012, pp. 31–40

⁹ Zentralrat der deutschen sozialistischen Republik 1919, p. 1.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 18.



Richard Müller addressing the First National Congress of Councils, 1918.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS AND BUNDESARCHIV BERLIN, IMAGE 146-1972-038-36,
PHOTOGRAPHER: ROBERT SENNECKE.

the attempted coup of 6 December, after lunch. Müller's charges against the Deputies were undoubtedly justified, but his speech, which was uncharacteristically strident, failed to pull wavering Social Democratic delegates over to his side and the battle lines only hardened further. The task of defending the council system thus fell to Ernst Däumig, but even his oratorical skill could not overcome the conflict between the USPD and the SPD. Eventually an overwhelming majority of delegates supported the election of a national assembly. Having lost the major battle, partisans of the council system won on the '*Hamburger Punkte*', points of agreement proposed by delegates from Hamburg which confirmed the soldiers' councils' position in the army and disempowered the officers.

Richard Müller made no secret of his disappointment at the next general assembly of the Berlin workers' councils: 'This central congress was Germany's first revolutionary tribunal, but there was no revolutionary atmosphere at all. My expectations were none too high going in, but I had no idea that this congress was going to turn into a political suicide club.'¹¹ The council movement had reached a political dead-end and for Richard Müller personally it was a hard, perhaps the hardest, defeat of his political career. The left should have paused to reflect and reorient at this point, but the course of events left no time for that.

The council congress had been tumultuous and the USPD's boycott of elections to the Central Council, created there to take over the national responsibilities of the Executive Council, only handed the SPD a majority on that

¹¹ General assembly of the greater Berlin workers' councils on 23 December 1918, in: Engel, Holtz and Materna 1997, p. 16.

all-important body on a platter and hardened battle lines for the conflicts that followed.

The Blocked Path to Socialism

On Christmas Eve, government troops heavily shelled the royal palace and the former royal stables which were being used as the headquarters of the Volksmarinedivision (literally People's Naval Division, a revolutionary navy unit). Though triggered by a wage conflict, the underlying reason for the action was the government's desire to be rid of the Volksmarinedivision and its 'red sailors', who were known to be radical revolutionaries.¹² The sailors' intense resistance and the solidarity of the incensed population of Berlin prevented the planned surprise attack that was to follow. What became known as the *Blutweihnacht* (Bloody Christmas) of 1918 bode ill for the future. For the first time, the avowedly socialist government used armed force against the very revolutionaries to whom it owed its power. It would not be the last time. Although the Volksmarinedivision survived, during the ensuing government crisis on 27 December the USPD deputies left the Council of People's Deputies in protest at the attack. The USPD was now out of power.¹³

Dissatisfaction in the USPD with its own deputies in the Council for People's Deputies had been growing well before this and the Spartacus League was openly considering a split. The Shop Stewards had problems too: at an assembly in the second week of December they accused their deputy on the governing Council of People's Deputies, Emil Barth, of disloyalty to the Revolution and supporting Ebert's policies. They confronted him with a choice: resign from the government or leave the Shop Stewards' group. Barth chose to remain in office and was expelled from the group on 21 December. The Shop Stewards remained firm in their expulsion and refused to re-admit Barth even after he left the government along with other USPD deputies only six days later. When Barth wanted to attend a Shop Stewards meeting on New Year's Eve, he was thrown out with no discussion.¹⁴ On the day they expelled Barth, the Shop Stewards moved to clinch the power struggle in the party by demanding, in a press statement, that the USPD leave the government and a new party conference be called in which the struggle against the SPD and its government, and

¹² Barth 1919, pp. 108–23.

¹³ Müller 1925, pp. 6–15; Winkler 1984, pp. 109ff.

¹⁴ Dirk H. Müller 1985a, p. 323; Barth 1919, p. 128; Wilhelm Pieck's report, in Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB 1960, p. 396, and in '*Vorbereitungen für die Revolution*' AdsD Bonn, NL Levi, box 142, file 285, pp. 26, 31.

participation in the forthcoming national assembly elections as an ‘antiparliamentary tendency’, could be discussed.¹⁵

Opposition to the SPD was also witnessed at the USPD’s Greater Berlin district unit on 28 December on the question of party nominations for the upcoming national assembly election. Ernst Däumig and Richard Müller refused to run on a ticket with Hugo Haase, member of the Council of People’s Delegates and leading figure of the moderate wing of the USPD. Their critique, which did not confine itself to the Christmas bloodbath alone, resonated strongly in the assembly. Georg Ledebour also rejected Haase’s nomination and like Müller and Däumig refused a ticket that included him. Instead, Ledebour and Emil Eichhorn demanded a joint ticket of Berlin’s USPD left and the Spartacists. Ernst Däumig reiterated that Haase was compromised by his participation in the government and demanded that the party stand on a ‘fundamentally revolutionary footing’.

Däumig and the Stewards were, however, prevented from winning the assembly over to their cause by an unexpected turn of events. ‘Strong emotions’ ran through the hall when a delegate made public a party list, allegedly distributed by the Revolutionary Shop Stewards in an assembly of the Berlin workers’ councils, which consisted of Ledebour, Däumig, Karl Liebknecht and other ‘representatives of the radical left’ and assumed cooperation with the Spartacus League. This had remained a controversial idea ever since it was proposed and it appeared as if the Stewards had conspired on the alliance. One speaker questioned the Shop Stewards’ right to propose it and even Emil Eichhorn explicitly distanced himself from it. The assembly therefore rejected the proposal. This turn of events put Ledebour, Däumig, and Richard Müller on the defensive. Ultimately, Emil Eichhorn won the party nomination with 326 votes and Hugo Haase right behind him with 271 votes. The Shop Stewards were isolated and Müller, Däumig and Ledebour were not nominated.¹⁶

Effectively sidelined even in the USPD, the Shop Stewards became interested when, on the following day, 29 December 1918, the Spartacus League held its national conference in the banquet hall of the Prussian state parliament and discussed the creation of their own party, the Communist Party. Though initially taken by surprise, Richard Müller and his comrades discussed both

¹⁵ *Dokumente und Materialien zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, series II, vol. 2, November 1917–18, edited by the *Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus* in the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), Berlin (GDR) 1958, p. 645.

¹⁶ The above two paragraphs depend on information in *Die Freiheit*, 29 December 1918; *Vorwärts*, 30 December 1919; Morgan 1975, pp. 209f. Exactly how many nominations were required remains unclear from these sources.

joining the party and establishing their own.¹⁷ Liebknecht led for the Spartacists in the negotiations on the Shop Stewards joining the nascent KPD and was very interested in integrating them into his new party project. However, this was easier said than done. Richard Müller, Ernst Däumig, and Georg Ledebour represented the Shop Stewards. The discussions stretched into New Year's morning 1919 and the founding party conference took a break until the afternoon. Progress was blocked by long-standing differences: the Shop Stewards agreed with Liebknecht's and Luxemburg's positions, but the majority of the participants in the party conference had what Müller called an 'anarcho-syndicalist-putschist mentality'.¹⁸ He had a point: the congress included not only members of the Spartacus League but also the German International Communists (Internationale Kommunisten Deutschlands – IKD, also known as the 'Bremen Radical Leftists', Bremer Linksradikale). This group advocated a boycott of elections to the national assembly and opposed organising within the dominant social-democratic labour unions in favour of small syndicalist unions.¹⁹ These views contradicted the Shop Stewards' positions on union and left unity. Although the IKD's support for the council system implied opposition to bourgeois parliamentarianism, the Shop Stewards wanted to use the national assembly elections for an 'anti-parliamentarist campaign' to propagate the council system. They did not want to isolate themselves with a boycott and were even less inclined to give up the major labour unions as class organisations.

Müller also had reservations about the Spartacus League. All prior convergences notwithstanding, he squabbled with Liebknecht on New Year's Eve and insisted that the Spartacists give up their 'putschist tactics' while Liebknecht called Müller a 'mouthpiece for *Vorwärts*'.²⁰ The old animosities, dating back to the days before the Revolution, were alive and well. These animosities were based on political, not personal, differences. When, on Christmas day, the *Vorwärts* building was occupied in protest against the attack on the Volksmarinedivision, the Shop Stewards, hoping to avoid a renewed escalation

¹⁷ The long-lost protocol of the founding congress of the KPD was rediscovered and published by Hermann Weber as *Der Gründungsparteitag der KPD – Protokolle und Materialien*, in 1969, see Weber 1969b, on the Stewards, p. 279, Wilhelm Pieck's report in Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB 1960, p. 409. Wilhelm Pieck, *Vorbereitungen für die Revolution*, AdsD Bonn, NL Levi, box 142, file 285, pp. 31, 36.

¹⁸ Müller 1925, p. 88. For more on the composition and sequence of events of the party conference, see also Winkler 1984, pp. 116ff.

¹⁹ On the Bremen Radical Leftists, see the biography of their leading figure Johann Knief, Engel 2011.

²⁰ Protocols of the KPD founding congress, in Weber 1969b, p. 271.

of armed conflict, negotiated an end to the occupation.²¹ For its part, however, the newly founded central communist organ *Rote Fahne* (Red Flag) depicted that minority occupation as the revolutionary initiative of the masses and accused the Shop Stewards of having cold feet.

On New Year's Day, the Shop Stewards presented the KPD delegates with five conditions for their participation in the new party: renunciation of fundamental antiparliamentarianism, total parity between Shop Stewards and Spartacists on the executive board, a revision of the Spartacists' 'street tactics', Shop Stewards' influence on the party's publications, and removal of the word 'Spartacus' from the future party name.²² These conditions clearly indicated mistrust. The Shop Stewards had never considered the Spartacists reliable allies and the composition of the founding party conference and its decisions only inflamed differences further. For all that, along with Rosa Luxemburg, even Liebknecht, whose relationship with the Shop Stewards had always been rocky, made a strenuous effort to set the conference on a slightly more pragmatic course. Under their influence, for example, the conflict about participation in social democratic labour unions was shelved and the general electoral boycott was transformed into a boycott of national assembly elections alone. These compromises were not, however, sufficient for unity. The Shop Stewards' five conditions were not acceptable in their original form and were rejected at the party conference amid shouts of 'Hear! Hear!'

Liebknecht now sought to downplay the Shop Stewards' influence on the negotiations, claiming that their importance was confined to Berlin, that they were not a real organisation but only 'a loose association' of 'comrades with connections to workers', and that Ledebour and Richard Müller's positions 'in no way correspond to the Revolutionary Shop Stewards' views'. At the same time, he left the door to their participation in the KPD open, praising their collaboration to date and expressing the hope that the current mistrust would prove ephemeral.²³ Clearly, the Stewards' organisation was important for Liebknecht. Despite all their disputes – the facts that he had interrupted the founding congress to negotiate with Müller and that he tried to win the Stewards (or substantial numbers of them) over until the last moment show

²¹ Wilhelm Pieck, 'Vorbereitungen für die Revolution', AdsD Bonn, NL Levi, box 142, file 285, pp. 34f.

²² Protocols of the KPD founding congress, in: Weber 1969b, p. 273; Müller 1925, p. 89. Wilhelm Pieck held Georg Ledebour responsible for the conditions which the delegates considered unacceptable. See 'Vorbereitungen für die Revolution', AdsD Bonn, NL Levi, box 142, file 285, pp. 39f.

²³ Protocols of the KPD founding congress, in Weber 1969b, pp. 275, 278.

that their network was crucial for any attempt to form a working-class party to the left of the USPD.

Though some of Liebknecht's words were meant to be conciliatory, they indicated a tendency toward fragmentation that the Shop Stewards rejected in no uncertain terms. In the end, the disappointed Spartacists disparaged Richard Müller as a 'See-Saw Man' and Däumig as 'the Preacher'.²⁴ The KPD founding conference ultimately passed another resolution aimed at Müller, Däumig and Ledebour calling them 'pseudo-radical members of the bankrupt USPD' who wanted to break up the Shop Stewards' alliance with the Spartacists, declaring 'that the KPD will not be influenced by these troublemakers'.²⁵ Such verbal abuse and the clumsy attempt at dividing the Shop Stewards from their spokesmen prevented the two groups from working together. Inflexibility brought neither side any gains. The young KPD remained a minor party without a firm base in the factories until winter 1920 when it was reinforced by another merger with the left wing of the USPD that had split in October 1920. But for the moment, the deficit could not be addressed by mere radical verbiage. The Shop Stewards, on the other hand, were in limbo: they could not work with the KPD, they were isolated in the USPD, and they were reluctant to create a new schism within the labour movement by establishing a third party.

Berlin's January Uprising

While the left struggled internally over its political direction, workers' bitterness toward the government was coming to a head. The *Blutweihnacht* and lack of movement on socialisation sowed doubts about the revolutionary will of the governing Social Democrats. The People's Deputies' attempt, starting in January 1919, to remove USPD member Emil Eichhorn from office as Berlin's chief of police stirred up that sentiment even further. The affair culminated in Berlin's January Uprising, often misleadingly called the 'Spartacist Uprising'.²⁶

It was far more than that. The Shop Stewards, the USPD, and the nascent KPD had jointly called for a mass demonstration against Eichhorn's removal on

²⁴ Däumig had in fact sermonised at Berlin's atheist Free Thinkers' Society, see Morgan 1983 and Weir 2010.

²⁵ Protocols of the KPD founding congress, in Weber 1969b, pp. 281, 290.

²⁶ Only two of the 33 members of the leadership of the uprising were members of the KPD / Spartacus League. At the start of 1919, the Spartacists were in no position to organise the uprising alone. It was a majority faction of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards that bore the main burden of this action. See the detailed analysis by Ottokar Luban, Luban 2004, pp. 19–45 and Luban 1999, pp. 176–207.

5 January. The response exceeded all expectations. Although the demonstration had been called on short notice, hundreds of thousands of people rallied outside police headquarters in Alexanderplatz. Under the circumstances, the military governor, Anton Fischer, was unable to dismiss Eichhorn as planned. The demonstration's organisers gathered inside police headquarters to discuss their next steps but ultimately could not agree on anything and decided to meet again in the evening.

Meanwhile, several hundred demonstrators who were hungry for action re-occupied the *Vorwärts* building. *Vorwärts*, the main SPD newspaper, was a frequent target of popular anger in these years. It not only represented the Social Democratic government, there was still anger among Berlin's workers at the 1916 dismissal of Ernst Däumig and the anti-war editors and the newspaper's rightward turn. This was seen as robbery by many and, in occupying the *Vorwärts* building, Berlin workers were demanding the return of what they considered their collective property.

The evening meeting on 5 January between the Shop Stewards, the KPD, and the USPD again started indecisively, but the discussion intensified and took a new turn when the *Vorwärts* occupation was announced. Heinrich Dorrenbach, leader of the Volksmarinedivision, declared that his men and all of the other Berlin regiments were behind the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and ready to bring down the Ebert-Scheidemann government by force.²⁷ Now Liebknecht, whose party had opposed a hasty 'coup de main' in Berlin at the start of January, called for the immediate overthrow of the government.²⁸ And now, rivalries between the Spartacists and the USPD that had been smouldering for months took on the 'grotesque form' of competition in radicalism and grew into a 'political delirium'. As Müller recalled, 'Each orientation considered itself the only one that was patently revolutionary. Each wanted to outdo the other in revolutionary zeal. If Liebknecht and Pieck supported overthrowing the government, how could Ledebour set a less ambitious goal?'

Even reports from the two soldiers' councils that criticised Dorrenbach and warned that the Berlin troops' support could not be relied on were insufficient to change minds. Ernst Däumig, with his military expertise, was utterly speechless at the ignorance of those assembled and Richard Müller could convey his rejection of the coup plans 'only with difficulty' against the 'general dissent'. Nonetheless, he did insist that 'neither the political nor military' preconditions for upheaval existed in the country as a whole and a 'premature, isolated act in

²⁷ Müller 1925, pp. 31–3.

²⁸ See leaflet 'Alle Macht den Arbeiter- und Soldatenräten', reproduced in Müller 1925, pp. 219–21.

²⁹ Müller 1925, p. 35.

Berlin could endanger the broader development of the Revolution'. But he was unable to convince them. Of some 70 people who were present, only Müller, Däumig, and four other Shop Stewards spoke out against the upheaval and demanded that the actions be limited to a general strike.³⁰ Once the action got under way, of course, Müller sought to limit the damage to the workers' cause as much as he could.

Events would vindicate the caution of Müller and his comrades. The action's supporters went on to form a revolutionary committee made up primarily of members of the Shop Stewards, even though their spokesmen, Müller and Däumig, opposed the plan. The committee took up quarters in the royal stables that had become the Volksmarinedivision's camp. But the revolutionary guests were not warmly received there and by the afternoon of January 6 they were ushered back out again. The revolutionary committee had to move to the police headquarters at Alexanderplatz. Now the rank and file of the Volksmarinedivision declared itself unwilling to stage a coup over the Eichhorn affair, preferring to stay politically neutral in the conflict. They removed Dorrenbach as their leader for unauthorised action in committing the unit to the coup earlier.³¹ The poor state of the military side of the uprising was soon clear: while the workers had left their workplaces in droves, not even the red sailors in the royal stables could be won over to the revolutionary plans and other military units were even less inclined to participate. But the general strike nonetheless began with full force on January 6.

Müller and Däumig were the only USPD members to appear at the regular meeting of the Executive Council that day.³² Müller explained that his comrades had been prevented from attending 'due to revolutionary events' and proposed that the meeting be postponed. The SPD members rejected this suggestion and Müller and Däumig were also unable to stop a resolution against the *Vorwärts* occupation or a confirmation of Eichhorn's dismissal. Müller tried to save the situation by recalling that the social democrats' had so far cooperated in good faith and that resolutions such as the ones just passed

³⁰ Müller 1925, pp. 33–34. The six dissenting votes came from Richard Müller, Ernst Däumig, Heinrich Malzahn, Oskar Rusch, Paul Eckert, and Paul Neuendorf. Later accounts stated that Richard Müller went so far as to walk into one factory after another to convince Berlin metalworkers not to join the general strike. See Angress 1973, p. 208.

³¹ Müller 1925, p. 39.

³² Even Shop Stewards, Paul Neuendorf and Heinrich Malzahn, did not appear, despite their opposition to the coup plans. Malzahn had participated in the revolutionary committee because he did not want to 'stay on the side-lines'. We know nothing about Paul Neuendorf. See the *Sitzung der USPD-Arbeiterräte am 9. Januar 1919*, SAPMO-BArch, RY 19/II/143/2.

were ‘feeding the fire’. Müller felt that the Executive Council might have to act as mediator in the coming days and should therefore remain neutral. The SPD delegates, however, did not see things that way.³³

By the next meeting of the Executive Council on 8 January, armed fighting was already raging between workers and government troops in the newspaper district as the original *Vorwärts* occupation was followed by occupations of other newspapers and print shops. But the revolutionaries’ influence was restricted to a few residential streets. Despite a successful general strike and what initially seemed like strong support among Berlin’s working class for a change in government, the revolutionary committee that lead the January uprising was unable to seize power. Unlike 9 November, there was no plan for the uprising and no agreements on action with the workers in the factories and workplaces. The leaders of the action were unclear and split, the military did not side with the revolutionaries, and the thoroughly revolutionary masses of Berlin, who may not have wanted an armed uprising but did support a revolutionary strike to topple the government, waited for instructions in vain. However, with all attention fixed on the fighting, no one led the strike and it collapsed quickly. Disorganisation and a lack of planning prevented a real countervailing power from emerging during the strike.³⁴

In this muddled situation, a successful second revolution hardly seemed possible and the revolutionaries were soon negotiating with the government. The Executive Council was not, however, involved in the negotiations because the SPD Executive Council members refused to grant them an official mandate to negotiate on its behalf. Instead, USPD Executive Council members, Paul Eckert, Georg Ledebour, Heinrich Malzahn, and Oskar Rusch, negotiated on behalf of their party. However, the negotiations were in vain: the SPD leadership had no interest in ending the conflict through negotiations. It sided with the military that simply wanted to crush the uprising by force.

Although Richard Müller had described ending the bloodshed as ‘the most important thing that we have to address now’ in the Executive Council, the balance of power in it forced him into the role of a neutral moderator during its meetings. Worse, the SPD members in the Executive Council now confined it to organisational issues – its precarious financing or the printing of pamphlets, for example – and Müller chose to go along if only in order to prevent additional resolutions against the uprising.³⁵ While Malzahn, Rusch, and others preferred, in any case, to set the Executive Council aside and contribute to other things, Müller, as the chairman who still considered it

33 Executive Council meeting, 6 January 1919, in Engel, Holtz and Materna 1997, pp. 140–3.

34 See Luban 2004, pp. 19–45; also Luban 1999, pp. 176–207.

35 Executive Council meeting, 8 January 1919, in Engel, Holtz and Materna 1997, pp. 146–59.

his obligation to continue the council's work, was the revolutionary leader most hobbled by this state of affairs. So on the following morning, 9 January, the Executive Council discussed more 'business': arguing over financing for the workers' council elections, the use of the Council's official vehicles, and the correct place of maids, chimney sweeps, and laundry drivers in the council system's structures.³⁶

Discussion of urgent political matters now shifted to the Berlin USPD workers' council, an assembly of all Berlin council delegates who belonged to the USPD which met later on 9 January for a special session. During its heated discussions, a number of workers' council members voiced their dissatisfaction. Some made it clear that they resented insurrectionary plans being made over their heads. One worker complained of having been given a choice between 'my way and the highway'. Others pointed out that though they were told that 'there are plenty of weapons', they had in fact been waiting for weapons in vain for days. The inadequate planning for the uprising was also criticised and revolutionary ambiguities came to the surface when a worker named Stahlberg noted that, 'There were no leaders around and anyone who could shout gave orders', and another, whose name is unknown, retorted, 'People always shout for leaders, which only shows that the masses are not adults yet.'

Däumig and Müller once again made their fundamental opposition to the entire undertaking clear. Müller said that though the time could have been almost ripe for a second revolution, the present development had been 'artificially promoted' and had been fated to miscarry. Now, he claimed, it was simply a matter of 'getting away with just a black eye'.³⁷ Unlike the night of 5 January, the two men met with little dissent. Only Malzahn spoke out in favour of breaking off the negotiations with the government. He believed that negotiations should only be started up again after a longer general strike and from a position of strength. His view did not find favour in a meeting whose majority was already convinced that the uprising had failed.

Malzahn also reported on the negotiations with the government, but had little to say. The government, committed to repression, had flatly refused to agree to any of the revolutionary committee's offers. It even called for the creation of a 'civil defence force', effectively an anti-revolutionary militia, to fight the rebels. This, Malzahn noted ironically, was surely 'a true hallmark of a socialist state': 'Yesterday they even threatened a state of siege. And we always thought that steps like these were only possible in a capitalist state'.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 162ff.

³⁷ Meeting of the USPD workers' councils on 9 January 1919, SAPMO BArch, RY 19/II/143/2.

³⁸ Ibid. See also Müller 1925, p. 55.

The SPD's appeal to citizens revealed just how deep the rift between the two workers' parties was. While the members of one party wanted to push the Revolution forward to a council republic, the other party openly lobbied for the support of the bourgeois class to fight revolutionary workers. Richard Müller hoped that the SPD's manifest faith in the bourgeoisie would make the USPD's agitation so successful that 'next time we will completely overcome the blows that we are suffering now'. For now, however, he held fast to his critique: while he would prefer that the leftward trend among the rank and file would stride forward in 'Seven League Boots' and that Ebert and Scheidemann were done away with in just four weeks, the current situation was anything but revolutionary: 'The people who artificially provoked this action are ignoring the fact that the mass of Berlin's labour force runs behind the Scheidemanns. We can't get around that'. Ernst Däumig, clearly depressed at the state of class consciousness, added, 'We are isolated in this country even if we have small groups behind us. For the time being, we are a small minority in the dull grey swamp of the petty bourgeois and rural masses', and tersely summed up his feelings about the uprising, saying, 'you don't make a revolution by writing a new government on a piece of paper'.³⁹

Another meeting of the Executive Council was to be held on 10 January. The negotiations between government and revolting workers continued ineffectively, infighting on the left went on, and the Social Democrat-controlled Central Council, the body created to take over the national responsibilities of the Executive Council in December 1918, refrained, true to form, from doing anything. The government made its position clear on 8 January, when it informed its 'fellow citizens' that, 'Violence can only be countered with violence', that the Spartacists' 'reign of terror' would be thoroughly smashed and, even more ominously, that 'The hour of reckoning is approaching'. Besides the barely concealed threat, the government's announcement was particularly noteworthy for being addressed to 'fellow citizens' rather than the working class and for being issued by *'Die Reichsregierung'*, which stands for the government of the German Empire.⁴⁰ The title 'Council of People's Deputies' had been dropped immediately after the USPD members left and now not even the name 'Socialist Republic of Germany' was used. The separation of the government from the Revolution was symbolically as well as substantially complete.

As if wanting to drive the point home, commander-in-chief Gustav Noske went about procuring heavy artillery. The revolutionary committee responded to government threats by calling for armed insurrection. Such calls were far from

39 Ibid.

40 The leaflet is reproduced in Müller 1925, p. 57.

effective for the simple reason that the majority of workers, while opposed to the government, were unwilling to engage in armed struggle. Neither the revolutionaries nor the Social Democrats had been able to win them over. Instead, in a demonstration on 9 January, the rank and file demanded the resignation of all leaders responsible for the ‘fratricide’, including Ledebour and Liebknecht. In the USPD workers’ council assembly on the following day, there was also a proposal to ‘end . . . the fratricidal war without the leaders’ if necessary and similar resolutions were passed in various other assemblies.⁴¹ The enthusiasm and urge to act of 6 January had given way to a dull fury directed at the leadership of both SPD and the Spartacists. As was demonstrated at the Cirkus Busch on 10 November, the great majority of the working class wanted the socialist parties to unite once and for all.⁴² Figures like Müller and Däumig, who were not tainted by the uprising, could have politically capitalised on this renewed desire for unity and pursued political means to remove Ebert and Noske. But the ongoing bloodshed made it impossible.

The government was determined to escalate the situation. When the *Vorwärts* occupiers sent seven parliamentarians to negotiate, they were arrested by government troops, brought to the barracks, and shot.⁴³ The *Vorwärts* building was then stormed under cover of heavy artillery fire and the newspaper district was taken over by government forces. The police headquarters in Alexanderplatz, the other main scene of the uprising, were also stormed on the same night and, on the morning of 12 January, the uprising was finally suppressed.

Political Murder, Demoralisation, and the End of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards

Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were abducted by troops on 15 January 1919. While Emil Eichhorn had fled to Braunschweig, Luxemburg and Liebknecht had refused to leave Berlin and gone into hiding. Their decision was to prove fatal. On 13 January *Vorwärts* all but called for them to be killed in a satirical poem and the loyalist *Garde-Kavallerie-Schützendivision* (Cavalry Rifle Division) stepped forward to carry out the order.⁴⁴ Luxemburg and

⁴¹ USPD Workers’ Council meeting on 9 January 1919, SAPMO BArch, RY 19/II/143/2; Müller 1925, pp. 58ff.

⁴² For a description of the mood among the workers, see also Haffner 2004, pp. 164ff.

⁴³ Müller 1925, p. 66.

⁴⁴ ‘Viel Hundert Tote in einer Reih’ – Proletarier! Karl, Rosa, Radek und Kumpanei – es ist keiner dabei, es ist keiner dabei! Proletarier!’ – ‘many hundred corpses in a row, but proletarians, Karl, Rosa, Radek and company, none of them there, proletarians!’ This poem by SPD

Liebknecht were abducted from their hiding place and brought to the *Garde-Kavallerie-Schützendivision's* quarters in the 'Hotel Eden' across from Berlin's Zoologischer Garten. There they were beaten and ultimately shot 'on the run'. Liebknecht's body was brought to the mortuary as an 'unidentified body' while Rosa Luxemburg's was thrown into the Landwehr Canal where it was not discovered for months.⁴⁵

Liebknecht's body was identified soon after the events and news of his death in suspicious circumstances arrived in the middle of an Executive Council meeting. Council Secretary Cläre Casper recalled that, 'Richard Müller immediately interrupted the meeting and announced the news I had given him. A committee made up of three comrades (Richard Müller, Paul Eckert, and Paul Wegmann) was formed immediately. They went straight to the mortuary. A demonstration had started there since the early morning hours when word that Karl Liebknecht was in the morgue first spread'.⁴⁶ As chairman, Richard Müller now had the sad duty of confirming the identity of Liebknecht's body in the Berlin mortuary. When the committee returned to the Executive Council meeting, Fritz Brolat, a social democrat member, asked if the body really was Liebknecht's and, upon confirmation of this, replied, 'Yes, well that's what happens when you agitate like that'. Cläre Casper lost control: 'I was completely outraged by the impertinence, leaped at him, hit him in the face, and yelled furiously, "You are the murderers! All of this is your fault!"'⁴⁷

The reckoning from the January Uprising was sobering. The revolutionaries had been thoroughly defeated. The military had Berlin under martial law. The KPD was banned and leaderless. Georg Ledebour was arrested and interned for an indeterminate time. Meanwhile, the rank and file of the Berlin working class was filled with rage, disillusionment, and helplessness. These got free reign at a new USPD workers' council assembly on 18 January and led to a

journalist Arthur Zickler (*Vorwärts*, 13 January 1919) was interpreted as a call to murder Liebknecht and Luxemburg, it left a lasting impression: in contemporary sources as well as in witnesses' recollections recorded in the GDR 40 years later it was consistently referenced with bitterness. See, among others, the reports from Gustav Milkuschütz, Bruno Peters and Jacob Weber. SAPMO BArch SG Y 30/0639, SG Y 30/0099, and SG Y 30/0985.

⁴⁵ The most detailed account of Liebknecht and Luxemburg's murders is Gietinger 2009a; see also Gietinger's biography of Waldemar Pabst, the Freikorps officer who supposedly ordered the murder: Gietinger 2009b.

⁴⁶ Oral history interview file, Cläre Derfert-Casper, SAPMO-BArch, recollections, SG Y30/0148, p. 31. This was not noted in the Executive Council's records. Given that Casper's accounts are otherwise quite reliable, this may not have been an official meeting but an informal discussion.

⁴⁷ Oral history interview file, Cläre Derfert-Casper, SAPMO-BArch, Erinnerungen, SG Y30/0148, p. 31.

decision to always consult the workers' councils before 'large-scale actions'.⁴⁸ But this did not lift the mood of the rank and file and several delegates reported a total collapse of any willingness to fight in their workplaces. Even the delegates were demoralised and the assembly was poorly attended. Ernst Däumig observed that he knew his 'revolutionary history rather well' and did not think that 'there has ever been a revolution as lame as the one we just saw ... Our Russian comrades worked day and night without getting tired and here we have the sorry spectacle of one person after another disappearing'. With the words, 'Sometimes I want to howl with rage', he cancelled a planned report and the assembly ended early.⁴⁹

The outcome of the uprising demoralised the Revolutionary Shop Stewards too. They had made up the majority of the revolutionary committee and they would never recover from the blow. Richard Müller claimed that the Shop Stewards' reputation was badly damaged in January 1919 and they effectively dissolved as a group.⁵⁰ Though many of its members would continue to work closely together in the Executive Council, the general assembly of workers' councils, and later in the Works Council Centre (Betriebsrätezentrale), the initiative shifted to the USPD workers' councils.⁵¹

Theorising Council Socialism

Despite this near total defeat for the left, Müller and Däumig did not give up. They had predicted the bourgeois majority and the defeat of the combined SPD and USPD in the national assembly elections of 19 January 1919. The National Assembly now met in Weimar because after the uprising Berlin appeared

⁴⁸ Although Richard Müller had been opposed to the January uprising, he criticised this decision. Ultimately, however, he had to accept it. USPD workers' councils meeting, January 18, 1919, SAPMO BArch, RY 19/II/143/2.

⁴⁹ USPD workers' council meeting, January 18, 1919, SAPMO BArch, RY 19/II/143/2.

⁵⁰ Müller 1925, pp. 90, 208. The rank and file's clear criticism in the three surviving records of the USPD workers' council meetings between 9 and 18 January indicates that there was a tendency to attack 'the leaders' in general, even though none of the Shop Stewards are ever named personally. See SAPMO BArch, RY 19/II/143/2.

⁵¹ Müller 1925, pp. 90, 208. Dirk H. Müller mentions a formal split of the Shop Stewards into KPD and USPD factions, supporting this with Müller's brief comments and statements made by Emil Barth, who had not in fact been in Berlin during the uprising (see Barth 1919, p. 129) and who was no longer a member of the Shop Stewards. Dirk H. Müller 1985a, p. 327. Detailed source materials relating to the circumstances of the Shop Stewards' dissolution are altogether lacking.

unsafe for such a government. There, the social democratic parties remained dependent upon the agreement of bourgeois forces such as the Catholic Centre Party in the process of drawing up a new constitution.

Müller and Däumig now set about trying to reorganise the council movement. A resolution in the general assembly of the Berlin councils warned against the anti-council majority in the national assembly and demanded a second national council congress. Richard Müller sent that demand for information and comment to every workers' and soldiers' council in Germany.⁵² It resonated widely and the social democrat dominated Central Council which, for all its inactivity, remained the highest organ of the council movement, was forced to call for a second congress in April 1919.

Above all, however, Müller and Däumig were concerned with elaborating a systematic theory of worker's councils. Until then, the right to control the workplace and socialisation of key industries had served as the minimum programme of the movement, but all else remained unclear.⁵³ The forum that discussed the councils' future ultimately became the newspaper *Der Arbeiter-Rat*, literally 'the workers' council', which Däumig established in February 1919 and in which the first outlines for a lasting institutionalisation of the council system would be presented.⁵⁴ For neither the discussion around mass strikes in 1905 nor the inspiration of Marx's writings about the Paris Commune had yet led to the formation of an effective council theory. Even anarcho-syndicalism, which was oriented to rank-and-file democracy, was vague about the concrete organisation of a non-capitalist mode of production.

Over the course of the following year, Däumig and Müller developed the theory of a 'pure council system' directly out of the practice of the workers' council.⁵⁵ The 'Guidelines on the Tasks and Scope of the Workers' Councils',

⁵² Institut für Marxismus Leninismus beim ZK der SED (ed.), *Dokumente und Materialien zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, series II, vol. 3, Berlin (DDR) 1958, p. 122.

⁵³ See von Oertzen 1976, p. 85.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 79. Richard Müller wrote for the *Arbeiter-Rat* and as of issue 45/46 in the autumn of 1920 he replaced Max Sievers as its editor-in-chief. Ernst Däumig was the contributing editor for the duration.

⁵⁵ Some of Richard Müller and Ernst Däumig's writings on the council system have been translated into English: Ernst Däumig, 'The Council Idea and Its Realization'; Richard Müller, 'Report by the Executive Council of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils of Great Berlin', both in Kuhn 2012. The best synthesis of Müller's ideas on the council system, including its historical basis, is his essay 'Das Rätesystem in Deutschland', see Müller 1921b. Other German sources on Müller and Däumig's ideas include their essay, 'Hie Gewerkschaft – Hie Betriebs-Organisation – zwei Reden zum heutigen Streit um die Gewerkschaften', Müller and Däumig 1919; Richard Müller, 'Das Rätesystem im künftigen Wirt-

for example, which the general assembly of the Greater Berlin workers' councils adopted on 17 January 1919, were ground-breaking.⁵⁶ They were the result of the clarification process that Müller and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards underwent in trying to unify and systematise their council structures and propose a socialist transition programme, of sorts.⁵⁷ More drafts followed with Müller and Däumig publishing them not only in the *Arbeiter-Rat* but in pamphlets and other publications as well.⁵⁸ They wanted to popularise the concept of the council system and to refute the blanket complaint that council rule would mean 'Bolshevist chaos'.

The 'pure council system' was intended not to complete parliamentary democracy but to replace it.⁵⁹ Moreover, employers had no place in it: it was a pure workers' council structure. Over the course of the conflict-ridden year, 1919, the pure council system became the most influential council model, in part because most SPD politicians either rejected council structures altogether or at least insisted on employer participation. The KPD, on the other hand, emphasised the necessity of seizing state power and dismissed detailed council designs as 'schematism'.

Müller and Däumig envisaged the council system as workers' struggle in three successive forms: one within capitalism, another as a transitional form moving toward socialisation, and the third creating an ideal socialist planned economy. It did not separate the socialist utopia from the fighting organisation; rather, the revolutionary organisations were to prefigure the emancipatory objectives. The council structures' struggle from the bottom up would take from the capitalists the knowledge that had enabled them to dominate workers and employ it for the autonomous self-organisation through which they would advance step by step to managing the entire economy according to plan in the future.

schaftsleben', *Der Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 6, 1919, reproduced in Bermbach 1973, pp. 88f; Richard Müller, 'Die staatsrechtliche Stellung der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte', *Der Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 6, 1919; Ernst Däumig, 'Der Rätegedanke und seine Verwirklichung', in *Revolution – Unabhängiges sozialdemokratisches Jahrbuch*, Berlin 1920, pp. 84ff, reproduced in Schneider and Kuda 1968, pp. 69ff; Ernst Däumig, 'Irrungen und Wirrungen', *Der Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 2 1919, excerpts reproduced in Schneider and Kuda 1968, pp. 78ff.

⁵⁶ *Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 20, January 1919. Reproduced in Schneider and Kuda 1968, p. 80.

⁵⁷ von Oertzen 1976, p. 83.

⁵⁸ See for example Müller and Däumig 1919.

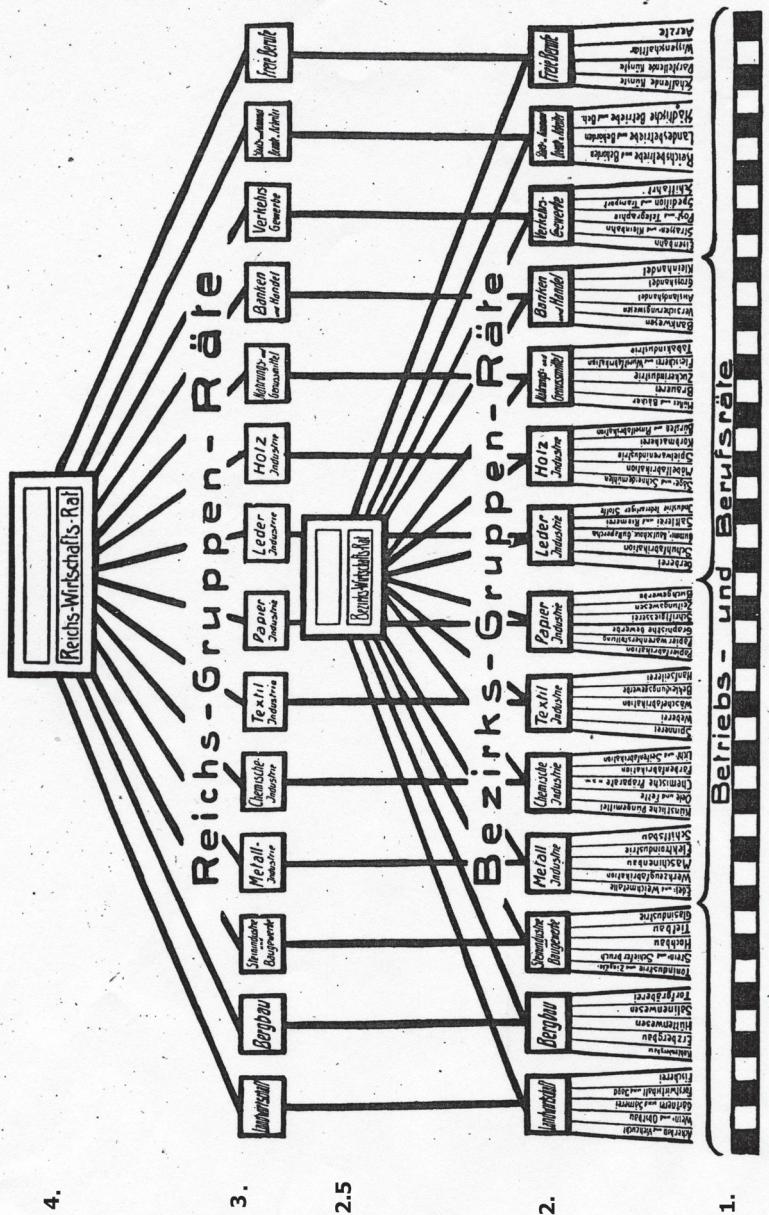
⁵⁹ The following description of the pure council system is based on Arnold 1985, pp. 148–211; von Oertzen 1976, pp. 69–109; Schneider and Kuda 1968, pp. 34–64 and 65ff, 109ff; and Hottmann 1980.

In the spirit of Marx and Engels, Müller and Däumig saw their model as both a radical form of democracy *and* a dictatorship of the proletariat understood as the class dominance of the working class. It was distinct from Leninist and social democratic conceptions of nationalisation in that workers' self-management was central. The definition of the proletariat was an economic one: only those who did socially useful work without exploiting alienated labour could be elected to the councils and this expressly included the intelligentsia, office workers, engineers, public officials, etc., as 'brain-workers'. Whatever the merits of this definition, we may note that while white-collar workers and professionals did work within the council structures as a caucus of 'democrats', the majority of them could not be won over to socialist objectives.⁶⁰

The model consisted of parallel economic and political workers' council structures, the first elected in workplaces and the second in geographical constituencies. The political workers' councils were envisaged as a pyramid of municipal councils, regional councils, a national council congress, and a central council. They were to replace traditional political organisations such as the city councils and state governments all the way up to the national government and to make all decisions not directly related to production. The economic councils arose from workplace councils, industry-specific regional councils, general economic councils for each region, a national economic council for each industry and a general national economic council at the top. Larger council bodies consisting of more than 100 people such as the national economic council and the national group councils were to form management committees in order to retain their capacity to act. The highest authority in the entire system was to be a central council joining the two systems to which the apex councils of both economic and political councils would be subordinate.

In its pure form, therefore, the model required councils to assume political as well as economic power. It also required the German state to be federally restructured into territorial districts that represented economic regions such as greater Berlin or the Ruhr – and not the states such as Prussia or Hessen-Nassau formed for long-forgotten dynastic reasons of the feudal past. In addition, parliamentary structures were to be abolished. Executive and legislative

60 For more on the Democratic caucus in the Executive Council, see the editors' notes in Engel, Holtz and Materna 2002, pp. xxvi ff and Gerhard Engel, 'Die "Freie demokratische Fraktion" in der Großberliner Rätebewegung – Linksliberalismus in der Revolution 1918/1919', in *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung (IWK)*, No. 2/2004, pp. 150–202. The Democrats had in fact introduced the first female delegates into the council movement. Those delegates were often teachers or came from other white-collar professions.



Graphische Darstellung einer Räteorganisation zur Betätigung auf wirtschaftlichem Gebiet

Scheme of the 'pure council system' 1921.

TAKEN FROM: RICHARD MÜLLER, DAS RÄTESYSTEM IN DEUTSCHLAND, IN: I. JEZOVER (ED.): DIE BEFREIUNG DER MENSCHHEIT, BERLIN 1921

Outline of a pure council system

(*Graphische Darstellung einer Räteorganisation zur Betätigung auf wirtschaftlichem Gebiet*, source: Richard Müller, 'Das Rätesystem in Deutschland', in: Die Befreiung der Menschheit, Leipzig 1921)

The diagram is reproduced as in the original source, only numbers assigned to levels were added for this edition.

The diagram starts on level 1 with Works Councils (*Betriebsräte*) representing larger factories and Professional Councils (*Berufsräte*), representing freelance workers and small enterprises where several workplaces unite in order to elect their council delegate. The Professional Councils represent a profession uniting a group of small workplaces, rather than a single workplace.

The industry-specific Regional Councils (*Bezirks-Gruppen Räte*) on level two comprise the elected representatives of all Works Councils of a given industry in a specific region. Müller proposed that the dynastic states of the German Reich should be abolished in favour of economic regions.

On level 2.5 we find the General Economic Councils (*Bezirkswirtschaftsräte*) and the General Political Councils (*Bezirksarbeiterrat*). In the diagram, only one General Economic Council is depicted: it would be the highest economic council for its region. The empty box on level 2.5 represents the General Political Council for that region. It would sit atop the other half of the council-structure not visible in the diagram, the territorial workers' councils based, not on industries, but on municipalities and regions. While the different types of economic councils are responsible for economic planning, the political councils would rule all matters beyond production.

On level 3, the National Industrial Councils are depicted (*Reichsgruppenräte*). They are responsible for an entire industry on a national level such as Mining (*Bergbau*) or Agriculture (*Landwirtschaft*). Like all upper councils in this scheme, these councils are elected by the lower level of councils.

On level 4, the National Economic Council (*Reichswirtschaftsrat*) as economic government for the whole country is located. The empty box stands for a political council as national government to be elected by the lower territorial councils in the regions.

powers would no longer be separated; there would only be political and economic self-management.

Only the lower levels of the political and economic council structures – such as the workplace, municipal, industry and district councils – were to be directly elected. The upper levels would be elected indirectly by the lower councils. Individual workplaces would be managed jointly by their workplace and district group councils to avoid situations where the interests of specific factories or enterprises conflicted with the general interests of the population. The indirect electoral elements should be understood as Müller and Däumig's concession to efficiency criteria: the upper council levels were to gather expertise, coordinate, and represent the interests of the economy as a whole while the particular interests of specific workplaces fell under the aegis of the lower councils.

All councils at all levels, however, were to be elected and subject to recall at any time in order to prevent bureaucratisation and the formation of a hierarchy. With its dual territorial and production-unit based structure, the model dispensed with party politics and would ideally even make labour unions superfluous. But until it was implemented, Müller and Däumig quite resolutely pushed for all council socialists to become members of the social democratic unions in order to win them over to their cause. They also took care to anchor their council system in the USPD's agenda. This distinguished them from the syndicalists, who supported immediate withdrawal from the major unions, organised their own grassroots unions, and also rejected parties in general.⁶¹ Müller and Däumig's pure council system provided a framework that simultaneously avoided over-centralisation due to its grassroots democratic construction while also attempting to rule out economic fragmentation that might develop out of particular regional interests and the 'industrial egoism' of single enterprises by means of extensive coordination and mediation. They pursued a middle course between the absolute federalism of the anarchosyndicalist models and the centralised state conceived by Social Democrats and Bolsheviks.⁶²

The weakness of Müller and Däumig's proposed model lay in the unclear relationship between territorial councils, such as the municipal workers' councils of Berlin, and the economic councils that operated on a company basis.⁶³ Especially in the middle and upper levels there was no demarcation of where

⁶¹ One substantial exception was the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD), which was a product of a left breakaway from the KPD and strongly syndicalist. Bock 1969.

⁶² For a comparison with syndicalism, see Hottmann 1980, Arnold 1985, pp. 184ff.

⁶³ For the unmediated juxtaposition of councils in Berlin and a critique of the pure council system in general, see Engel, Holtz and Materna 2002, p. xiii.

economic decisions ended and political decisions began. The structures and processes of economic planning, or the mediation of needs and production, were also left unclear. We can only suspect that Müller and Däumig had in mind a democratised variant of the planning processes that had been common in the wartime economy or within the large trusts.⁶⁴ The prevailing monopoly structures and, above all, the reality of nearly comprehensive planning for necessities, resources, and production within the framework of the wartime economy left little room for doubt about the feasibility of a planned economy.⁶⁵ The council system's detractors, therefore, never claimed any purported superiority of the market in mediating production and consumption. Instead, they referred to the council models' radical demands for democracy as a recipe for 'chaos and confusion'.

Although Däumig and Müller tried to address all possible criticisms by providing a very detailed model, their scheme could never answer all the questions how a future socialist economy would work in practice. For example, the relation of the political and economic councils remained unclear, and the problem of planning production in a way that it would meet the demands of consumers was not addressed at all. Such weaknesses could not be entirely eliminated and only illustrate the great difficulty of reorganising an industrial capitalist society – with its profound separation and complex interrelationship between economic and political structures – on a socialist basis, in such a way as to fulfil material needs as well as ensure democratic functioning.

In addition to the problems already mentioned, their models also suffered from critical democratic limitations: the problem was not so much that employers were deliberately denied voting rights, which was the entire political point of workers' councils, but that housewives and the unemployed were also unrepresented in the council system. It therefore not only excluded participation by the former ruling class, but also by essential parts of the working population. Another democratic limitation was the possibility that a hierarchical council bureaucracy could emerge from the indirect voting system for the upper councils.

Such limitations, which also mark other council theories, often lead to the conclusion that the council system is in itself an unworkable utopia. Such judgments fail to consider that today's liberal democratic capitalism also needed centuries to evolve from its simple precursors and is still riddled with

⁶⁴ Lenin had made a similar proposal in his 1917 book, *The State and Revolution*. It did not, however, provide council structures.

⁶⁵ Even bourgeois employers and politicians like Thyssen head, Alphons Horten, and AEG head, Walther Rathenau, had proposed plans for socialisation and a state-run economy in light of the obvious economic crisis at the end of World War I. See Euchner 2000, p. 286.

problems. Negative judgments on council theories often cite the alleged inefficiency of radical democratic structures. However, council self-management offers enormous potential not only for the emancipation of workers but also for more efficient workflow and decision-making structures, which often become bureaucratic and fragmented in hierarchical systems such as capitalism. That is why even modern neoliberal capitalism has had to try to combat these problems and to channel workers' creativity directly into the work process through 'flat hierarchies', group work, etc. In the neoliberal capitalist context, however, such attempts quickly come up against the requirements of capital accumulation (which is entirely different from efficient satisfaction of human needs) and no real self-management results. Müller and Däumig's council ideas are therefore interesting to later generations despite their weaknesses.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of their model is that it does not conceive of the planned economy and self-management as being in opposition to each other. On the contrary, real worker self-determination is the basic criterion of both. Planning in its social democratic and party communist versions has failed to focus so centrally on conceptions of emancipation. Only the anarcho-syndicalists, as the third major tendency in the labour movement, have supported producers' self-liberation as energetically. Although anarchism in Germany had always been a marginal fringe movement, it did attain considerable influence in the form of revolutionary syndicalism, primarily in the Ruhr region in 1918/1919. Müller and Däumig's model, however, is distinct from the syndicalist proposals in its high degree of mediation: district councils and the national economic council were to work toward reconciling various interests and enabling interregional planning. By contrast, most contemporary syndicalist-federalist discussions simply fail to consider the overall organisation of production in society or what Marx, in his critique of Proudhon, called 'the general organisation of labour in society'.

Less a critique of anarchism than a counter-model to party and state socialism, the pure council system has remained the starting point for critical and unorthodox currents in Marxist thinking. For example, Karl Korsch, one of the founders of 'Western Marxism' and a source of inspiration for the student movement of the 1960s, was a writer for the *Arbeiter-Rat* in 1919 and adopted Müller's council model in his writing.⁶⁶ Korsch's later and widely-disseminated criticism of authoritarian Marxism would be inconceivable without his experiences in the council movement. Müller's council ideas were also consciously

66 For Müller's influence on Karl Korsch, see Arnold 1985, pp. 214–17. Korsch's writings in the *Arbeiter-Rat* are reproduced in Buckmiller 1980. For verification of the initial publication, see pp. 622, 637, 638, 641.

analysed by some later historians and political scientists with an eye to reforming and expanding co-determination models in the German Federal Republic of the 1960s, for example by Dieter Schneider, Rudolf Kuda, and Peter von Oertzen.⁶⁷ Although these attempts at updating the council system remain a topic of academic and political discussion to this day, they have lacked the political force necessary to gain a wider audience.

Müller and Däumig's ideas reached the height of both their dissemination and their impact during their own time given that the pure council system was one of the most influential models in the council movement of that period. Even then, however, they were often mixed with anarcho-syndicalist ideas in practice, as the major strike wave in the spring of 1919 showed.

The March Strikes of 1919

By early 1919, the SPD's participation in the attack on the *Volksmarinedivision* on Christmas Eve 1918, the murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht the following January, and the perpetual delays in moving toward socialisation had undermined the trust that the SPD had enjoyed at the first council congress in December 1918. This growing disaffection contributed to general strikes in the Ruhr region, the region around Halle in central Germany, and Berlin. The strikers demanded recognition for workers' councils and the immediate socialisation of key industries. But the strikes were neither spatially nor chronologically coordinated. Although they forced the government to make verbal concessions, they were defeated one by one. An initiative to provide nationwide strike leadership, by Richard Müller and the Communist Wilhelm Koenen, failed. The strikes in Berlin only started as they were ending elsewhere, making it impossible to develop a national dynamic. The wave ended with few gains: the socialisation that the government was at one point forced to promise in response to the strikes could then be shelved for good.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ See Schneider and Kuda 1968, pp. 42–62 and the expert report that Peter von Oertzen wrote for IG Metall called *Die Probleme der wirtschaftlichen Neuordnung und der Mitbestimmung in der Revolution von 1918*, reproduced in von Oertzen 1976.

⁶⁸ An extensive study of the events was recently provided in Dietmar Lange, *Massenstreik und Schießbefehl – Generalstreik und Märzkämpfe in Berlin 1919*, Münster 2012; on Müller's role there see esp. pp. 73, 93, 161.

See also Morgan 1975, p. 230; Müller 1925, pp. 148–62; Winkler 1984, pp. 159–184, and Knoll 1957, pp. 477–89.

After the decision to strike was made in Berlin on 3 March, the Executive Council took over the leading role from the Berlin general assembly of workers' councils, placing Richard Müller in the forefront. He was now effectively chairman of the strike committee and simultaneously chaired Berlin's general assembly of councils. During the strike, the assembly met daily to discuss the course of the action and oversaw the work of the strike committee. As its chairman, Müller reported to the assembly daily. This was another example of the radical democracy embedded in the practices of the council movement. As chairman of the strike committee, Müller worked hard to include social democratic workers in the strike so as to build a unified front from below against the government. Furthermore, as in January 1918, Müller counted on a shift to the left among the SPD rank and file who were at odds with their ministers. That is why he tried to ease tensions between irritated SPD and KPD delegates in the general assembly and ensure a common course of action.⁶⁹ His efforts were successful at first: although the KPD was not part of the strike leadership, all workers' parties and currents participated in the strike, from the SPD to the Independents and Communists to the Syndicalists.⁷⁰ It took considerable effort to maintain that unity. Divisive issues constantly arose, such as whether socialist and social democratic presses, some of which had continued to operate so as to influence the course of events, should be allowed to do so during a 'general' strike.

Müller was initially able to navigate around such obstacles, but the wisdom of the strikers' delegates could not always be relied on. The general assembly on 6 March was one such occasion. There, the Communists and the Independents insisted on shutting down the gas, water, and electrical plants. Müller opposed

⁶⁹ See *Vollversammlung der Groß-Berliner Arbeiterräte vom 4. März 1919*, in Engel, Holtz and Materna 2002, pp. 10f.; and *Vollversammlung vom 5. März*, p. 45. Soviet historian J.S. Drabkin criticised Müller for attempting to mediate, 'covering up conflicts, and calling for "tolerance"', but even he had to admit that the KPD's separate strike committee had no influence and that 'broad swaths of the Berlin proletariat' did not understand the party's position: Drabkin 1983, pp. 153, 157.

⁷⁰ During the strike, the KPD published several flyers carrying vehement polemics against Richard Müller's united front policy. They particularly criticised his alleged attempt to include even liberal democrats in the strike committee. See Institut für Marxismus Leninismus beim ZK der SED (ed.), *Dokumente und Materialien zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, series II, vol. 3, Berlin (GDR) 1958, pp. 299, 303ff., and 310. If Müller's offer to the democrats was in fact real, it would have been because Müller was courting 'brain-workers' for council purposes, as well as the non-partisanship that Müller and Däumig were striving to attain in the council system. In any case, this contentious issue offered the KPD a welcome excuse for avoiding the real issue of a united front with the SPD.

this and put it to a vote twice, but the majority supported it both times. Worse, despite being entirely unrealistic in light of the actual balance of power, delegates began demanding that the Executive Council take over the city, further straining Müller's nerves. He warned the delegates that, 'Everyone has the right to make a fool of himself as often as he wants. I'm making a tremendous effort to keep this assembly together. But at some point this will be too much for me. May the devil have patience then'.⁷¹ He then acerbically pointed out that the delegates should not wait for the strike committee's newsletter that was due the next morning: the committee would not be able to publish the next issue due to power outage.⁷²

Before he could propose adjournment, however, the SPD delegates spoke up. They protested vehemently against the decision in favour of a strike by the gas, water, and electrical suppliers, an action that they considered irresponsible, and walked out of the meeting. This proved too much even for Richard Müller, who had always been deeply devoted to left unity and rarely gave in to frustration. He gave up leadership of the strike and claimed that without the SPD delegates, who, after all, represented the majority of the working class, the Executive Council had no mandate for wide-ranging decisions. The assembly should elect a new chairman.

In the days that followed, the Social Democrat-dominated Berlin union committee, which had been subordinated to the general assembly at first, agitated strongly against the strike, distributing huge numbers of leaflets, while the Communists refused to form a new strike committee with the Independents.⁷³ The unified strike front was shattered and the strike was left without leadership, organisation, or a common goal.

Meanwhile, the decision to disrupt the utilities was implemented, followed by government troops occupying the waterworks in the western part of the city and restarting the water supply. The result was that Berlin's posh bourgeois quarters were provided with water while the working-class neighbourhoods were not. Ernst Däumig passionately criticised the situation in the following

71 *Vollversammlung vom 6. März 1919*, in Engel, Holtz and Materna 2002, p. 82.

72 J.S. Drabkin accused Müller of attempting 'to prevent the strike from expanding in any conceivable way', and therefore of having stabbed his caucus in the back and killed the resolution 'with routine demagoguery': Drabkin 1983, pp. 160–1. In fact, Müller fought the water stoppage with all his power in order to deny the SPD any excuse to break the strike front. He also held to his united front tactics right through the strike even though his own caucus no longer supported it. His hope for a leftward shift in the SPD caucus may have been unrealistic, but the Executive Council's demand for political power was just as illusory at that moment, given the fact that the military had effective power and would hardly give it up because of a mere declaration.

73 Müller 1925, p. 159.

general assembly: 'This is what happens when we mindlessly put all our eggs in one basket in the face of a disaster'. The water supply simply could not be cut off 'in a city and at a time when 50,000 badly wounded people lay in military hospitals', nor 'in a city where the proletariat's hygienic conditions were bad enough!'⁷⁴

In addition to the reigning chaos, government troops provoked armed conflict between government-linked Freikorps paramilitary groups and republican units, which spread in the days that followed. Under the pretext of preventing looting and establishing order, the larger and far better armed Freikorps deliberately escalated the situation.⁷⁵ The general public was frightened and confused. Even the general assembly delegates and Richard Müller himself had no idea what was happening at first and believed the fighting to be apolitical.⁷⁶ It was a dramatic misperception which prevented the strike leadership from developing any kind of strategy for such armed confrontations.⁷⁷

The situation had escalated sufficiently by the evening of 6 March that Müller rethought his resignation of that morning and decided to lead the next general assembly as a representative of the Executive Council. 'It's an entirely thankless task, but we have to try', he told his council colleagues, 'because we can't just leave things to chance'. In order to restore decision-making capacity, he also made an effort to establish a dialog between the various parties before the next assembly.⁷⁸

A report on the progress of negotiations between representatives of the strikers on the one side and the national assembly and the Weimar government on the other was received at the general assembly on 7 March. Heinrich Malzahn, speaking for the Berlin strikers' delegation, disclosed that although the government had stated that it would consider including workers' councils in the constitution, it had so far refused to give any concrete assurances. It

⁷⁴ *Vollversammlung vom 7. März 1919*, in Engel, Holtz and Materna 2002, p. 111.

⁷⁵ Lange 2012, pp. 101–16 and pp. 132–58.

⁷⁶ Even Ernst Däumig, a military expert because of his former service in the German colonial troops, thought that the military was 'currently only [engaged in] rivalry, not political struggle', while Richard Müller considered the conflicts to be 'the troops fighting amongst themselves'. Given that they considered the struggles to have been provoked by the government, it is also possible that Müller and Däumig deliberately supported the 'apolitical rivalries' story in order to prevent the workers from taking arms and to avoid a repetition of the bloodshed of the previous January. See Engel, Holtz and Materna 2002, pp. 87, 124.

⁷⁷ Lange 2012, p. 123 and p. 161.

⁷⁸ *Sitzung des Vollzugsrates mit Mitgliedern des Zentralrates vom 6. März 1919*, in Engel, Holtz and Materna 2002, pp. 87, 91f.

also refused to give amnesty for the strike's political prisoners as long as conflict and looting continued in Berlin and to lift the state of siege.⁷⁹ The government's 'law and order' position was sobering: the strikers' political demands were not acknowledged and there was no end in sight to the repression. The government was confident of its military superiority and the weakness of the strike, which had already crumbled outside Berlin.

After considerable discussion, Ernst Däumig gave a lengthy speech explaining that the situation had gone seriously awry and that the least damaging way forward was to end the strike on condition that no disciplinary action follow, all prisoners be released, all workplaces occupied by the military be reopened, and the Freikorps leave Berlin. Däumig's speech ended as dusk fell and the assembly had to continue in the dark, 'because there was an assumption that lighting would be impossible due to the strike at the power plants'. As a result, the minutes were also broken off with only the comment that Däumig's resolution was accepted 'with great irritation'.⁸⁰

There could be no more talk of an organised strike movement – the situation was sliding toward another catastrophic defeat. The following day Müller opened the general assembly with an assessment of the strike that was beyond pessimistic: 'It has been hollowed out, it has crumbled, in a few days it will end completely'. The SPD and the Berlin union committee publicly distanced themselves from the possibility of continuing the strike in widely distributed leaflets and other propaganda. Although 'the most obscene swearwords had been flung at him' the previous evening, Müller felt obliged to put these facts before the public. In light of them, Müller urged, it was necessary to 'get back to work together in order to keep the workers united and go back into action when the time has come'. Telephone negotiations were held with the social democratic president Philipp Scheidemann, who had been elected by the national assembly in February, to settle the conflict. However, they too yielded little: Troop withdrawal was rejected, amnesty for striking workers in government-owned companies was guaranteed, but everything else was referred to other authorities.⁸¹

It was not easy to announce such meagre results to the angry crowd, but in light of the situation, Müller considered it his duty at least to call off what he considered a hopeless strike in an orderly way to prevent further fragmentation and squandering of energies. The discussion that followed was correspondingly heated. USPD spokesman Hugo Albrecht denounced the bourgeois

79 *Vollversammlung vom 7. März 1919*, in Engel, Holtz and Materna 2002, pp. 92–7.

80 *Ibid.*, pp. 112f.

81 *Vollversammlung vom 8. März 1919*, in Engel, Holtz and Materna 2002, pp. 123f.

and social-democratic press in particular for portraying the bloodbath in the streets as government troops fighting a 'Spartacist coup'. Albrecht lamented ironically that, 'we Germans suffer from this nonsense because we can read. If half of us were illiterate, it would be impossible to lie to us like that ... A person who cannot read or write is ten times saner than anyone who reads the lies of the bourgeois press today'.⁸²

The Communist, Herrfurth, told of the fury with which 30 Freikorps soldiers wrecked his apartment as they searched it. By contrast, he continued, Communists did not engage in such putschist tactics and were not responsible for the rioting. Indeed, the KPD had passed a resolution condemning the SPD's 'vile incitement to pogroms'. They had also opposed its proposals for socialisation which amounted to 'state capitalism' that would make 'all working people into capital's slaves'. However, the KPD resolution went on to blame the strike's collapse on the 'cowardice and desire for compromise' among the leaders of the USPD, including Richard Müller. In attacking the participation of 'Scheidemanns' among the strike leadership, the KPD failed to distinguish between the SPD rank and file, who had indeed participated massively in the strike, and its higher echelons. Many Communists did not understand that although they abhorred both street fighting and violence and believed that socialism would come to them without conflict, the mass of the SPD rank and file and unorganised workers were in favour of socialisation. They could have been won for defensive actions against the Freikorps, but not for any offensive use of arms. While Müller wanted to win those workers for his political front by drawing them into the strike, the KPD just deemed anyone not sharing their insurrectionist tactics as 'counter-revolutionary'. Unlike during the January strike of 1918, the strike organisers had seriously pursued a united front from below in March 1919, independently of the Social Democratic leadership. Müller's response to Herrfurth's personal attack was dry: 'We can't have people first addressing the discussion and then reading out the most recent editorial from the *Rote Fahne*'.⁸³

The political temperature remained high with the discussion repeatedly returning to the state of siege, the fighting, and the transgressions of the military. It seemed to Herrfurth that even the Social Democrats no longer had control over the Freikorps: 'Today the entire country is in the hands of a bunch of soldiers. Major Gilsa does what he wants and Noske can only say "Yes" and "Amen". The man belongs in a mental hospital'.⁸⁴ He was referring to Erich von

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., pp. 125–6.

84 Ibid., p. 133.

Gilsa (1879–1963), assistant to Gustav Noske, who was by then the SPD Minister of Defence. Herrfurth implied that Gilsa, not Noske, commanded the massive military violence against the strikers. In the face of unsuccessful negotiations with the Weimar government and Defence Minister Noske in Berlin, the general assembly was finally forced to call off the strike on 8 March. Although Müller had to take the vote twice because of calls for a recount, the result was clear in the end.⁸⁵

However, even after this vote, the government continued the conflict in an effort to finish off the left and the fighting continued. Armed workers defended the neighbourhoods of Friedrichshain and Kreuzburg for several days while they were besieged and fired upon; Noske and his troops did not shy away from using heavy artillery in residential areas. More than a thousand civilians were killed in these massacres, the majority of them unarmed strikers. The exact number of victims is still unknown, but it far exceeded the causalities from the January uprising. Gustav Noske had declared martial law in the middle of the strike and given his troops an additional carte blanche to shoot anyone identified as insurgent on the spot, even if they were willing to surrender. Annihilation, not negotiation, was the order of the day in March 1919.⁸⁶ The revolutionary Volksmarinedivision as well as the left wing of the Republikanische Soldatenwehr met their end in this fighting. They had been the last of the republican troops in the capital.⁸⁷ It is no coincidence that the National Assembly in Weimar enacted a law establishing a provisional national military on 6 March 1919 even as battles were raging in Berlin. In re-establishing a regular army with traditional discipline and no soldiers' councils, the law effectively legalised the Freikorps.⁸⁸ The annihilation of the republican troops was thus crowned with the institutionalisation of the loyalist and reactionary units as the army of the new state. This serious birth defect would become a decisive factor in the Weimar Republic's destruction.

After the Tumult

After these March battles, Richard Müller wrote an open letter to Philipp Scheidemann, the SPD *Reichsministerpräsident*, who headed Germany's newly elected provisional government. Müller reminded him of how only a little

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 136.

⁸⁶ See Lange 2012.

⁸⁷ Grünberg 1983, pp. 149–69; Müller 1925, pp. 163–91.

⁸⁸ Berthold and Neef 1978, document no. 186, document no. 187.

over a year ago, in January 1918, he had castigated the state of siege as 'sowing seeds of hate' and firmly repudiated the reactionaries' demands for a powerful chancellor reigning by force. The Scheidemann of 1918 had declared that only the 'lowest scum among the German people' could make such demands. The Scheidemann of March 1919 appeared to have turned into that very variety of scum, serving willingly as the instrument of the very measures he had so vehemently repudiated so recently.⁸⁹ Scheidemann's reply not only rebuffed Müller's accusation, justifying martial law as a necessity imposed by an alleged 'declaration of war' against the Republic by the Volksmarinedivision, he also sought to divide the left by describing the strike *per se* as legitimate and opposing only the 'criminal elements' who had degraded the Revolution into an 'opportunity to plunder and loot'.⁹⁰

Notwithstanding their defeat and chaotic course, Richard Müller would later describe the March strikes as, 'the most powerful uprising of the German proletariat, blue- and white-collar workers and civil servants, and even part of the petit bourgeois middle class'. It was '[an] uprising that was unprecedented in its size and depth'. The strikers 'did not achieve their intended goal, but without that powerful popular movement, without those struggles, the tiny amount of progress in the social field would not have been achieved'.⁹¹ Müller's historical assessment of the strikes as the 'decisive struggles for the continuance of the Revolution'⁹² is largely correct; only the reference to the 'tiny amount of progress in the social field' is questionable: Müller was referring to some concessions such as the integration of the 'Works Councils' into the new constitution. However, they were made after a cruel military defeat and not as a result of negotiations and therefore were of dubious value. However, Müller at least judged them 'tiny' when compared to the strikers' revolutionary demands; others seemed to forget those demands entirely. Social Democrat Hermann Müller-Franken's judgment in his own memoir of the Revolution is a good example: 'The Revolution significantly expanded the number of people covered by social security'.⁹³ This could have been written in 1913 when the

⁸⁹ *Der Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 6/1919, also in *Die Republik*, March 21, 1919. For an eyewitness account of the fighting, see also Franz Beiersdorf, *Materialien über die Niederschlagung des 'Spartakusaufstandes' im März 1919*, SAPMO-BArch, DY 30 IV 2/2.01.

⁹⁰ Briefe zum Generalstreik, *Vorwärts*, March 22, 1919.

⁹¹ Müller 1925, p. 161.

⁹² So says the corresponding chapter heading in his book, *Der Bürgerkrieg in Deutschland*: Müller 1925.

⁹³ Müller-Franken 1928, p. 285.

SPD leadership routinely mistook social reform for socialism and reflected the social democratic mind-set that never understood the meaning of the revolutionary events of 1916–19. The upper levels of the party believed in institutional continuity, gradual social progress, stability, and order. Their idea of class struggle aimed at restoring harmony and they abhorred forms of social struggle, such as wildcat strikes, workers' councils, and uprisings, which they could not control. This desire for harmony led to the social democratic alliance with the military, which in turn used brute force and lethal violence against strikers while at the same time promising order and stability.

The March strikes and the government's policy of open violence were discussed at great length at the second national council congress from 8–14 April 1919. However, because the voting system was biased towards over-representing rural areas, the congress had a strong Social Democratic majority which, as in December, rejected the idea of councils as such. Müller had expressed a 'strong mistrust' of the congress well before it began, though he also spoke out against a boycott of the meeting. He was, after all, among those who had most resolutely called for that congress.⁹⁴ While the USPD caucus succeeded in shaking many certainties at the congress, the gathering did not produce a new impetus for the council movement.⁹⁵

Not only was the shock of the March events still at the forefront of the participants' minds, a proper accounting of the council movement was also prevented by two other developments requiring attention: fighting had broken out over the newly established Bavarian Council Republic and strikes in the Ruhr region had rekindled. The traumatic experiences of the January uprising and the March battles were repeated in local council republics in Bavaria, Braunschweig, and Bremen. They all met with a similar fate: remaining local, isolated movements which the government was able to forcibly suppress one by one. In fact, a civil war was raging in Germany and the alliance of the right-wing Freikorps with the national Social Democratic government worked to physically annihilate political enemies on the left. This, more than anything else, ensured that left initiatives to continue the Revolution would fail. Moreover, the fact that the provisional government that followed the collapse of the monarchy in Germany was, unlike in Russia, not bourgeois but social democratic, meant that it would not be easily brought down by disappointed

94 Richard Müller, 'Unsere Mindestanforderungen an den zweiten Rätekongreß', *Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 9, 1919.

95 Müller 1925, pp. 208–11. For more on how the congress progressed, see also *Freiheit*, no. 165, April 8, 1919, *Vorwärts*, no. 182, April 9, 1919 and no. 190, April 13, 1919.

masses. Despite all that had happened, a large number of workers continued to support their social democratic deputies. During Russia's October Revolution, by contrast, the majority of the population would not lift a finger to defend the provisional government because no worker or soldier could identify with it any longer.

CHAPTER 8

From Council Movement to Works Councils: 1919–20

The council movement changed its strategy after the strikes of March 1919 failed. Since replacing the national assembly with a council body was out of the question, it now sought to integrate councils into the Weimar constitution and invest them with the broadest possible powers – a change that Müller and Däumig could only accept with much gnashing of teeth.¹ The March strikes also delivered the first partial victory: Article 165 of the Weimar constitution provided for the formation not only of works councils but also district workers' councils, district economic councils, and a national economic council. The economic councils at both levels provided for employer participation, but according to the constitution the principle of a workers-only council was preserved at least at the district level. But since the constitution was a piece of paper that needed both further legislation and social practice to become a reality, the fight about the council movement was not over. This chapter will deal with the transformation of the revolutionary council movement into the Weimar Republic's corporatist works councils and Müller's failed attempt to build up both an independent movement of works councils and a revolutionary union movement supporting this.

Council Ideal and Works Council Reality

The struggle for the councils continued even after the constitution came into force in August 1919 and stretched well into 1920, but the new works council conception was considerably narrower in scope and the political workers' councils had died off everywhere or had been disempowered in favour of old governmental structures.² In this narrower form, the council movement focused on greater 'economic' representation and co-determination, on the one hand by pushing for a Works Councils Act which would more clearly define their role and, on the other, by clarifying the relationship between the works councils and the unions.

¹ Morgan 1975, p. 252.

² Morgan 1975, p. 268.

These purely economic works councils, *Betriebsräte* in German, operated on the factory level. They were organised to represent the workforce in individual enterprises in dealing with working conditions, wages, and hiring. They focused more or less exclusively on the shop floor in part because of the intensity of the economic problems and also because the broader political workers' councils that had operated on a regional and national level were defeated. In this form, however, the works councils became deeply rooted in the workers' everyday life: they could no longer be dissolved without breaking down production itself. As the revolutionaries focused on these works councils, they created a base for further steps toward a system of industrial democracy.

Richard Müller participated in the works councils initially as the chairman of the Executive Council that represented all types of worker's councils in Berlin and, after summer 1919, primarily as a leading member of the Berlin Works Council Centre. This new institution brought together all works councils in Berlin after the Executive Council, around which they had emerged, was dissolved. At the same time, Müller was also active as opposition leader in the German Metalworkers' Union (Deutsche Metallarbeiter-Verband, or DMV). Müller and Däumig, who had elaborated the pure council system together, also influenced the course of the works council movement beyond Berlin through the *Arbeiter-Rat* newspaper and interregional work at conferences.

While effectively operating within the narrower confines of the works council idea, Müller and Däumig's original vision of a pure council system continued to inspire and, perhaps, serve as a guiding light. For example, Müller and Däumig pushed through their proposals against those of the Communist, Wilhelm Koenen, at the Revolutionary Works Council Congress in Halle on 27 July 1919. Koenen's perspective was not unlike Müller's of November 1918: he believed the councils should exercise firm monitoring and co-determination rights without actually taking over workplace leadership. But now Müller was against this, vehemently attacking Koenen for having 'taken up negotiating' and generally for having moderated his positions. A committee on council system guidelines ultimately accepted a draft that followed the 'pure council system' propagated by Müller and Däumig in the *Arbeiter-Rat*. That draft not only required a reorganisation of the German federal states into more rational economic regions, but also assumed complete socialisation and the effective disempowerment of the ruling class. It also proposed establishing a system of political councils to replace the structures of bourgeois rule. Such a document could at best serve as a unifying vision, but it could no longer guide practical political work at a time when the council movement was on the defensive.³

3 von Oertzen 1976, pp. 153f., 162–4.

The draft's vigorous yet hardly realistic insistence on directly implementing a council utopia was criticised by its contemporaries until well into 1920 as well as by later historians. Fritz Opel, for one, thought of Müller as 'clinging to old ideas that are increasingly illusory'. Müller's tenacity, which probably appeared dogmatic given the reverses suffered by the council movement, had an explanation, however. At the back of his mind, another wave of revolution or a new 9 November that might bring capitalism to its definitive end was always just around the corner. That is why, even after the works council movement's final defeat in October 1920, when the works councils were subordinated to the unions, he claimed that 'worldwide revolution is here' and wrote an article about the politics of union development in England, Asia, and Soviet Russia, which supposedly heralded new revolutionary uprisings in Germany as well.⁴ Although he usually took power relations into consideration and had always resisted any form of overly hasty actionism, Müller's unbreakable faith in capitalism's impending collapse was the keystone of his constitution as a revolutionary. Such eschatological expectation was typical of the radical left in those years and events like the January uprising, the council republics, and the March strikes confirmed time and again that in reality the situation remained unsettled and kept such expectations alive. It is only in retrospect that we can read each such event as, in fact, providing fresh evidence of the powerlessness of left initiative in the face of concentrated state power. Nevertheless, the KPD was ruled by the hope of a revolutionary revival in Germany until the failure of the Hamburg uprising of 1923. It was only after the Weimar Republic stabilised in 1924 that the KPD abandoned that way of thinking.

Leading the Left Opposition in the DMV

By the end of 1920, Richard Müller was not only functioning as a leader of the works council movement but also as the head of the left opposition within the DMV. This opposition had its origins in the anti-war opposition at the 1917 union congress. Though the Revolution had turned this minority into a majority affiliated with the USPD, it was politically divided into a left tendency represented by the council supporters around Richard Müller and a moderate tendency around Robert Dissmann from Frankfurt. The left and the council supporters constituted a particularly strong majority in Berlin and there the general assembly was finally able to vote Adolf Cohen out of office as the head of the DMV in Berlin at the union's general assembly, replacing him with Otto

⁴ Richard Müller, 'Die Tagesfragen der Gewerkschaftsbewegung', *Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 45/46, 1920, p. 2.

Tost from the Revolutionary Shop Stewards' circle. In addition, on 6 April, the DMV general assembly adopted Richard Müller's resolution strongly condemning the policies of the General Committee of Trade Unions and calling for a national union congress to be convened promptly to accept the council system as a political programme for the union movement.⁵

The union bureaucracy tried to block this move. In light of the left's takeover of the district DMV offices in Berlin and other cities, including Braunschweig, Halle, Bremen, and Stuttgart, by voting loyalists out of office, the union leadership charged the left with undemocratic behaviour, terror, and divisive intentions. The leadership's move changed the agenda: settling this conflict became the priority. Instead of a national quorate union convention in which binding decisions about the union's political orientation could be made, an extraordinary meeting of the executive board and local DMV heads, including the many newly elected left heads, was ultimately convened in Stuttgart on 16–18 June 1919. At this meeting the executive board tried to push through 'guidelines' under which the removal of the long-time functionaries would be contrary to revolutionary labour law. As Fritz Opel commented, 'What mattered to the executive board above all was to secure its position in the organisation. It was threatened because the revolution had expanded the membership and the range of its political positions. The new, more radical, membership could now genuinely exercise its voting rights by choosing representatives with different views instead of re-electing the same functionaries over and over again by acclamation'.⁶ The leadership's strategy did not work, however. The opposition refused to vote on the guidelines and the executive board had to accept the new local heads.

Another contentious issue at the meeting was the union leadership's support for the war, a subject that, six months after the Revolution, had not yet been addressed. Indeed, the General Committee of Trade Unions had effectively continued the *Burgfrieden* under the rubric of the '*Arbeitsgemeinschaften*', collaborationist boards that were intended to reach a consensus between capital and labour on everything from working conditions to pay scales, as though the Revolution had never happened. These boards had been put in place by an initiative of the unions and representatives of major enterprises on 15 November 1918, six days after the Revolution and, thanks to them, labour had won an eight-hour day only by giving up on all other demands. Socialisation or workers' councils, in this context, were not goals to be attained but threats to the union leadership's claim to be the workers' sole spokesmen.⁷

5 Opel 1957, p. 86.

6 Ibid., p. 87.

7 See von Oertzen 1976, pp. 187ff. On the union representatives' motives, see also Plener 1999.

No wonder the executive board of the DMV now denied that it had committed any policy errors during the war. In a paper supporting the union leadership, Georg Reichel had the audacity to hold the working class as a whole responsible for the failure to resist the war in 1914: it had not organised itself sufficiently, worked too cheaply, and had therefore strengthened capitalism. An organised workforce, he claimed, would have made it possible for its leaders to oppose the war. The masses' willingness to work during the war had made its early end impossible, whereas the *Burgfrieden*, Reichel claimed against all evidence, had never been official policy in the DMV.⁸

After intense debate at the meeting, the left opposition managed to have Richard Müller recognised as a speaker with unlimited speaking time. In a powerful speech, he rebuffed Reichel's admonition of the membership and set the record straight. The union leaders had pursued a policy of continuity since the summer of 1914, embodied, for instance, in the executive board's antistrike leaflets during the 1916 mass strike. Nor had they ever seriously protested against Germany's annexation policy or the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. On the contrary, Müller continued, they had always supported the government's war policy. He furthermore defended the council system, which had just been denounced as 'Bolshevism', and called it an expression of a proletarian democracy superior to bourgeois liberal democracy. The councils' organisational form had developed directly out of new relations created by the Revolution and was not some sort of 'crazy theoretical fantasy'. He was realistic enough to acknowledge that only 'a pile of rubble' remained of the councils' former dominance of November 1918, but, since he did not regard the revolutionary situation as concluded, he predicted new political revolutions based on the assumption that capitalism was finished as an economic system.⁹ His revolutionary optimism was unbroken.

The moderate opposition had only weak representation at the conference. The Leipzig delegate, Arthur Lieberasch, a former member of the first Leipzig workers' council of April 1917, was the only one who spoke.¹⁰ Elevating socialism over the council system as an economic order, he demanded that the DMV unify under that principle. With that, the political lines of division within the DMV were clearly drawn – though decisions would come later, at that autumn's DMV national congress. Before that, however, there would be a congress of the entire union movement.

⁸ Opel 1957, p. 88.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ On Arthur Lieberasch's impact in 1917, see Dirk H. Müller 1985a, pp. 300–3.

Defeat at Nuremberg, Compromise in Stuttgart

Council supporters were unable to dominate the proceedings of the Tenth General Union Congress in Nuremberg, which started on 30 June 1919. With all German unions present, the balance of power looked very different. The leftist majority in the DMV counted for little. It was not Richard Müller but Robert Dissmann who, along with Carl Legien, chairman of the General Committee of Trade Unions, spoke for the opposition. Dissmann summarised the left position: they would stand their ground in the union movement and, 'in place of bureaucratic, fossilised thinking', would bring it 'the old revolutionary spirit'.¹¹ Dissmann was pleading for a return to the social democratic union tradition of the pre-war era, as opposed to the industry-friendly policies of the majority social democrats at the time. But workers' councils were not among Dissmann's demands.

Voting at the congress showed, moreover, that the opposition, whether left social democratic or council republican, was primarily rooted in the DMV and had not gained as much ground in other unions. Otherwise the old members of the General Committee of Trade Unions, who under Carl Legien's leadership had lead the unions into the *Burgfrieden*, could not have been elected to the executive board of the new umbrella organisation, the Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (ADGB), the General Trade Unions Federation, to replace the General Committee. The election results, however, meant that the same policies would continue under a new name. Not surprisingly, the General Committee's wartime activities were expressly approved by a resolution, marking a critical defeat for the union left.

Yet this did not discourage the left wing of the DMV. At the 14th DMV Union Congress in Stuttgart in October 1919, the opposition achieved much more in the metalworkers' union than it had at the general union congress in Nuremberg. Despite ingenious rules of procedure drafted by the executive board and despite the majority social democrats' claims that this or that opposition delegate was not elected in a formally correct way, the executive board was unable to prevent an oppositional majority at the general assembly.¹² Two resolutions were passed: one proposed by Richard Müller and another by Robert Dissmann. Both resolutions rejected the collaboration of unions and employers that had been established by the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* system and declared their support for the council system and for the dictatorship of the proletariat. These goals were an integral part of the USPD's programme

¹¹ Metallarbeiter-Zeitung, 1919, no. 30, pp. 116ff.

¹² Opel 1957, p. 97.

and, notwithstanding their Bolshevik tone, were supported by the party's moderate socialists.

In his resolution, Robert Dissmann, speaking of an advance toward the 'certain victory of socialism... flowing into the victorious worldwide proletarian revolution', urged various measures to democratise the union, such as increasing the financial authority of the local administrations, more frequent local general assemblies, and annual elections for union officials.¹³ Richard Müller's resolution ventured beyond union democratisation. He concretised the class struggle that Dissmann had conjured up as a 'fight for the means of production' in which traditional union organisations were no longer sufficient. In view of the 'final struggle that is moving ever closer', he recommended not merely democratising but also merging unions into 'powerful industrial organisations' as the 'foundation of an organically developing council system'. Calling for such industrial organisation meant breaking with the principle of union organisation by occupation in which each craft – bricklayers, plumbers or lathe operators – had separate unions. The DMV had moved into industry-wide unionism in which a given industry's entire workforce was organised in one common union before the war and Müller saw this as a model for all unions. As he had done before, he described the council system in three ways: as a fighting organisation within capitalism, as a vehicle in the transition to socialism, and as an organising principle for a future, non-capitalist society.¹⁴ Though Dissmann acknowledged the councils as a political goal, he did not want to restructure the DMV's internal organisation according to council socialist principles.

Despite their differences, however, both resolutions were accepted with the same majority of 194 to 129 votes. Though these majorities made it appear that the two wings of the opposition were united in all but minor tactical differences, there were critical differences between Dissmann and Müller that paralleled the conflict between the USPD's right and left wings. As historian Fritz Opel accurately identified them: 'What for Dissmann and the right wing of the USPD was little more than a declaration of belief in class struggle and in the politics of pre-war social democracy was for Richard Müller and the left wing a description of the current moment of the socialist revolution, and its symbol was precisely the council system'.¹⁵ And these differences showed at the congress: despite the similarity of their radical rhetoric, Dissmann's idea of strengthening local union districts in relation to the executive board ran counter to Müller's call to restructure the union on council democratic principles.

¹³ Resolution cited in Opel 1957, pp. 104f.

¹⁴ Opel 1957, pp. 105f.

¹⁵ Opel 1957, p. 101.

The former meant a moderate decentralisation, the latter, a total reorganisation based on grassroots democracy.

In any case, these two resolutions were non-binding. To give them effect, changes would have been required to the union charter and to effect these, the mere majority enjoyed by the unified opposition was not enough. According to the charter of the DMV, a two-thirds majority at the union congress would have been necessary to implement any structural reform of the union's internal organisation. So, in the end, neither the root and branch democratisation that Dissmann proposed nor the reorganisation on council principles that Müller urged were possible and only three smaller organisational changes – regulating the authority of unsalaried board members, regulating that of district level committees and democratising the districts through annual elections – were adopted into the charter. They limited the power of the union executive only slightly: the district-level union representatives still had to be confirmed by the executive board. So the changes remained well short of even Dissmann's suggestions, to say nothing of Müller's demands.¹⁶

So, while the opposition was able to pass resolutions that acknowledged the council system and vote the old executive board out of office, it could not undertake a substantial change of the union's structure. The result was, therefore, not only a compromise between the opposition tendencies but also a concession to the supporters of the old executive board whose agreement was necessary to make changes to the charter as well as for the financial security of an ongoing strike in Berlin.

The need for compromise also rolled back the left's gains on the composition of the executive board. Though Chairman Alexander Schlicke's three-decade tenure was terminated because of his role during the war (an unprecedented development given the traditional and continuity-minded culture of German trade unions),¹⁷ and though Dissmann and the moderate opposition member, Alwin Brandes, were elected to the board, Georg Reichel, who only that June had brazenly blamed the war policy on the rank and file of Germany's unions, was also included on the executive board of the DMV. Along with Paul Haase, Richard Müller was installed as chief editor of the union newspaper *Deutsche Metallarbeiter-Zeitung*: this was the only position of power that the radical left was able to take at the union congress.

The opposition's gains at the Stuttgart congress therefore left a dull aftertaste. They had been unable to change the charter to anywhere near the extent that even the more moderate of its two visions would have required, and,

¹⁶ Opel 1957, p. 108.

¹⁷ Bieber 1989, pp. 784ff.

though it was strong enough to change the leadership, it could not throw out the old executive board completely for tactical reasons connected to making the small gains it did. Müller must have been aware that the actual situation was less than ideal for implementing his council democratic ideas.

A year after the Revolution, the majority SPD government was securely in power with the support of the military while the USPD no longer controlled any positions of state power. The still-revolutionary works councils, on the other hand, were occupied with wage struggles. Müller had to content himself with a council system on paper, the actual realisation of which would have to await future revolutionary moments. He did, however, hope to use his position as chief editor of the *Metallarbeiter-Zeitung* to propagandise on behalf of the council system among the 1.6 million DMV members and to create a better starting point for the next revolutionary crisis.¹⁸

The Works Councils Act, Armed Conflict and Party Split

Such unity as the opposition in the DMV had mustered at Stuttgart could not last and no other large union had moved so far to the left. Furthermore, since the rank and file were opposed to large-scale actions and wildcat strikes without the union leadership's agreement, after the failed spring strike of 1919 the SPD government was able to proceed with its employer-friendly ideas in the matter of works councils, in particular in drafting the Works Councils Act. Whereas Article 165 of the Weimar constitution on co-determination in industry had remained reasonably open, thanks to the strike wave that was still in progress when it was drafted, the draft of the Works Councils Act announced on 6 February 1920 granted workers neither a real collaborative role in workplace management nor control over production, orders, or accounting. In fact, the works councils' role remained analogous to that of the worker committees of the *Hilfsdienstgesetz* of 1916. As Fritz Opel commented, the draft anticipated the 'end of all hope for effective worker co-determination'.¹⁹

But the workers were not inclined to abandon their hopes so easily. Though they did not strike, nevertheless on 13 February 1920, the Berlin Works Council Centre, which Richard Müller had established after the dissolution of the Executive Council to coordinate the works councils of the Berlin area, called

¹⁸ The membership count is taken from the statistical publication *Der DMV in Zahlen*, published in 1932 by the Verlagsgesellschaft des Deutschen Metallarbeiter-Verbandes Berlin, reprinted unaltered in 1980 by 1G Metall's Ortsverwaltung Berlin.

¹⁹ Opel 1957, p. 112.

for a large demonstration at the Reichstag along with the USPD and the KPD.²⁰ The Centre was led by Müller and some activists from the days of the Stewards' movement and it aimed to coordinate the works councils at a regional level to ensure that, though they were largely occupied with economic matters and shop-floor issues within their respective enterprises, they would also constitute a political presence in the region. In February 1920, this power was used to protest the Works Council Act.

Thousands of workers heeded the call. The government, however, was unwilling to make any concessions and had assembled troops to protect the Reichstag. There was a clash. As the Works Council Act was being read inside the Reichstag, soldiers fired on the unarmed crowd and 42 demonstrators died. While this bloodbath interrupted the law's passage, it was introduced unchanged a few days later and passed. Another episode of naked violence by a social democratic government against radical workers was notched up by the new German Republic.²¹

This turn of events must have come as a shock to Richard Müller and the council supporters who had called for the demonstration. He and his comrades had certainly expected conflict, but they could hardly have foreseen such slaughter. We do not know if Müller felt any doubt or fatalism as a result of the catastrophe. Those events probably confirmed his view that only a new revolution could finish what had started on 9 November 1918: demonstrations and strikes, as recent months had shown, could not move the government to make even the smallest concessions and only elicited brutal repression.

The soldiers of the new regularised army who had made themselves available to the SPD in its fight with the revolutionary left and radical workers over the previous year were in no way a mindless tool of the government. They clearly had their own motives, as demonstrated, completely unexpectedly for the social democratic majority, by the Kapp Putsch in the spring of 1920. Senior Prussian civil servant Wolfgang Kapp and General Walther von Lüttwitz

²⁰ Two different calls were published in the *Rote Fahne* and *Freiheit* on 1 January, 1920, with the *Freiheit* version saying that it had been issued by the 'Greater Berlin Executive Council'. This probably refers to the same organisation given that the 'Red Executive Council', which was made up of USPD/KPD representatives, had been banned in late 1919 but its USPD members, including Richard Müller, continued working in the Works Council Centre and therefore used the Executive Council's offices at Münzstrasse 24.

²¹ Axel Weipert reconstructed the events in his recent essay 'Vor den Toren der Macht. Die Demonstration am 13. Januar 1920 vor dem Reichstag', Weipert 2012.

mobilised their troops against the government and established a military dictatorship in Berlin.²²

The attack from the right brought the two opposing wings of the labour movement back together again and even Carl Legien and the General Trades Union Federation, the ADGB, called for a general strike. That call served as a signal: the SPD, USPD, and later the KPD also issued strike calls. But despite the success of the general strike and the unity of unions and working-class parties against reactionary forces, they were not able to reach an agreement on a joint course of action. Two parallel groups of strike leadership arose in Berlin: one was supported by the ADGB and the SPD and the other was the Central Strike Committee of Greater Berlin, which was supported by the executive boards of the USPD and the KPD, the Berlin Union Committee, and the Works Council Centre.²³ One reason for the left's divided organisation was the profound estrangement of its more radical currents from the social democratic government. Certainly every left current wanted to oppose the right-wing putsch, but that by no means meant that they wanted to defend the government of Friedrich Ebert. They had not forgotten the slaughter at the Reichstag in February 1920 any more than they had forgotten the brutally suppressed January uprising or the March strikes of 1919. While some members of the USPD wanted to reunite with Ebert for pragmatic reasons, others, like the Communists, would never do so.

Even with these divisions, however, the strike managed to paralyse public life nationwide and convinced the putschists to surrender. Richard Müller participated in Berlin and tried to give the entire affair a revolutionary inflection. He was bitterly disappointed, however, by the posture of the USPD board, which compromised with Legien and the SPD a few days later and called for an end to the strike. Müller and the Berlin works councils rejected its decision, but they could not maintain the strike alone. On 23 March, they too were compelled to end the strike. However, the strike did not end without another episode of considerable social democratic repression of radical armed workers, this time in Germany's heavily industrialised Ruhr region. A Red Ruhr Army of over 10,000 armed workers had formed in the wake of the Kapp Putsch and held the Ruhr even after the Kapp government had withdrawn, occupying the mines and calling for their socialisation. As soon as the social democrats were restored to office in Berlin, however, they moved to suppress this movement with armed force. The job of putting the movement down was given to the very right-wing military troops who had supported the putsch just days before.

²² On the putsch, see Erger 1967.

²³ Opel 1957, p. 116.

They were happy to make themselves available to the government without hesitation – as long as it was against ‘Spartacists’, they would fight under the social democrats’ command.

It was therefore no mere polemic when, at the USPD party conference in Halle six months later, Müller chastised the party executive, accusing the party leadership of abandoning the struggling workers in the Ruhr region by calling off the strike and surrendering to the despotism of government troops.²⁴ He went on to call the eight points of compromise that the USPD had won from Ebert ‘a deception of the revolutionary workers’. Müller’s attack on the party leadership was all the more furious because it was in part a response to a prior attack on him. It came from Luise Zietz, a politician who justified the USPD leadership’s actions by saying that it wanted to avoid a premature declaration of a council republic and a repetition of the mistakes of 1919. She claimed that the party’s executive board had even received several telegrams from the Ruhr with the demand that they, ‘Shut Richard Müller up, we don’t want a council republic’.²⁵ Müller vigorously denied that he had called out for the immediate establishment of a council republic either in Berlin or in the Ruhr.²⁶ It was only ‘after the USPD leadership’s agreement with Legien’ that he and Däumig finally accepted that ‘it is hopeless to continue striking’ and called an end to the strike in Berlin as well.²⁷

That strike was, however, a pale reflection of events in the Ruhr and could not have provided Müller with any opportunity to declare a council republic. While the Ruhr workers were putting up armed resistance, the Berlin workers were, as one KPD newsletter recorded, in the midst of council elections. Though, at the instigation of the communists, they took place much as Müller had originally envisaged them in his scheme of council socialism, the masses were nonetheless unable to take action and generate a revolutionary mind-set as existed in the Ruhr. The result was that many workshops simply delegated the existing works councils that had been formed according to the new labour law instead of electing a new generation of revolutionary workers’ councils.²⁸

²⁴ U.S.P.D.-Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des außerordentlichen Parteitages in Halle vom 12. bis 17. Oktober 1920, pp. 33ff. An unaltered reprint is available in the edition *Protokolle der USPD*, see USPD 1976.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 33ff.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁸ Newsletter no. 42 from KPD headquarters to its district organisations after the general strike was broken off, Berlin, March 22, 1920, in Könnemann and Schulze 2002, pp. 342–4.

Only among a core of activists was there hope that the council movement might be revived in the wake of the putsch. In its periodical, the *Arbeiter-Rat*, the Works Council Centre optimistically called for preparations for a third council congress, but it never materialised. Only a congress of the existing works councils was organised for that October in Berlin – the political councils could not be revived.²⁹

So, not only was making grand declarations and issuing propaganda for an immediate council republic not part of Müller's political style, the mood among Berlin's working masses, to which Müller was always more sensitive than his USPD colleagues, was not propitious. As we have seen, during the January uprising and on other occasions he had opposed tendencies to go it alone prematurely. It seems, therefore, not unlikely that the USPD board deliberately confronted him with unfounded accusations at the party congress in Halle in order to forestall his expected criticism of the board's policies. If anything, they were a symptom of the fact that the relationships between the various tendencies in the party were completely destroyed by October 1920, and in fact the party split at that very conference.

Given the deep disappointment over the hasty political compromise between the USPD and the SPD that ended the strike in March 1920, it is understandable that Müller, Däumig, and the USPD left vehemently resisted the offer from Carl Legien and the SPD for a workers' unity government. Instead, Hermann Müller-Franken of the SPD was elected chancellor and formed a coalition made up of the SPD and bourgeois parties – only the hated Defence Minister Noske and Prussian Interior Minister Heine had to resign.³⁰ While it is clear in retrospect that with this development the last chance, however faint, of moving the nascent Weimar Republic onto a socialist track was lost, it was not so apparent at the time. Müller and Däumig hoped that the Revolution would be rekindled throughout Germany in the wake of events in the Ruhr. But it was not to be. Instead, the lines of political division on the left became calcified and even the left's hard-won position within the DMV weakened over the course of 1920.

29 *Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 12/13, 1920. The paper was not published during the Kapp Putsch due to the general strike and, moreover, the printing shop and the compositor's room were destroyed by Kapp troops, which also delayed the subsequent issues. As a result, the editorial staff were unable to engage in the events directly. See *Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 11, 1920.

30 Opel 1957, p. 117; Rosenberg 1991b, pp. 97–8.

DMV Political Divisions and the Works Council Centre

One symptom of that decline was the escalating conflict between Richard Müller and the DMV's executive board. The ostensible reasons were Müller's dual role in the Berlin Works Council Centre and as editor of the Stuttgart-based *Metallarbeiter-Zeitung* and his refusal to move to Stuttgart. The executive board accused him of not being fully available to the newspaper and instead focusing on his position as chairman of the Berlin Works Council Centre, though, in fact, Heinrich Malzahn was chairman of the Centre at the time.³¹ These conflicts with the board were all the more threatening to Müller because the differences between the two wings of the DMV left represented by Dissmann and Müller were widening amid a noticeable rightward shift in the DMV. As representatives of the USPD's right and left wings within the DMV, Dissmann and Müller had already clashed at the USPD party conference in Leipzig in late November 1919. Müller was apparently afraid that Dissmann would propose a resolution directed against the council system and so reverse the decision that was made at the third party congress in March 1919. The differences were resolved after some discussion, but the relationship between the two men remained fraught.

The rank and file partly regarded the tensions as a matter of purely personal antipathy, much like the delegate Blütner, who, angered by the scenes that were unfolding at the congress, complained that it was becoming 'a duel between the bigwigs'.³² But that was not the case. A serious political conflict was unfolding between the council republican and left social democratic wings in the USPD as well as the DMV. It had begun to emerge in the resolutions at the Stuttgart DMV union conference in October 1919, but now it was erupting into the open. The moderate opposition in the union's executive board had gradually distanced itself from council ideas and it found having a council socialist like Müller as the chief editor of the union newspaper irksome. The executive, therefore, accused him of neglecting his duties as editor and using the unions and the paper only as vehicles for his council ideas. The conflict finally ended with Müller's resignation from the editorial board in June 1920.³³ The communist newspaper the *Rote Fahne* understood the significance of what had just happened: 'Richard Müller did not go from the editorial board of the *Metallarbeiterzeitung* of his own will and he was not removed because

³¹ Reichstagshandbuch 1920, Berlin 1920, p. 282.

³² USPD – Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des außerordentlichen Parteitages in Leipzig vom 30. November bis 6. Dezember 1919, pp. 436–40; unaltered reprint in: USPD 1976.

³³ See *Metallarbeiter-Zeitung* no. 26, June 26, 1920.

Dissmann and Brandes didn't like Richard Müller's face, but because his entire political orientation did not suit them'.³⁴

The council socialist trend among metalworkers could not be consolidated internationally either. Metalworkers from different countries gathered to talk at the Seventh International Metalworkers Congress in Copenhagen in August 1920, the first time this 'iron international' had met since the war. Both Richard Müller and Robert Dissmann attended as DMV representatives. Müller proposed a resolution against the Polish-Soviet War and, along with political support for Soviet Russia, called for a transition to direct action as well as a struggle for the means of production in each country. This resolution was rejected and the congress adopted a milder rival resolution penned by Dissmann. Although it included a healthy dose of criticism of capitalism and called for a boycott of weapons deliveries to enemies of Soviet Russia, it contained few specifics about the struggle in each country. Richard Müller declared it a step forward compared to the results of previous conferences, but criticised its non-binding nature. This amounted to a criticism of the iron international rather than Dissmann's resolution: the international could not pass binding resolutions, only rely on national organisations to accept them, and the national executive boards were, according to Müller, 'anything but resolute socialists in deed.'

Müller also spoke against the Amsterdam-based International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), criticising the nationalist and reformist leadership exemplified by Carl Legien. He had been the head of the Generalkommission der deutschen Gewerkshaften, the German unions' national federation, and was elected to head the ADGB (Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund) that replaced the Generalkommission in 1919 despite his support for the war. Müller criticised this continuity as well as the non-binding nature of the Amsterdam International which he blamed for the unions' failure during the war. Müller pleaded instead for a new international of unions with 'strict centralisation' and more member participation on the international level. Above all, he demanded more determination: 'The debates and decisions of this congress must not peter out in empty declarations, rather they have to express a will to act'.³⁵ And he went further, demanding that the metalworkers 'seriously examine whether the iron international should be part of the Amsterdam or the Moscow union centre'. Later, in the summer of 1921, he would speak far more vigorously in favour of affiliating with the newly formed 'Moscow' International.

³⁴ *Rote Fahne* no. 112, June 24, 1920.

³⁵ Richard Müller, 'Die eiserne Internationale', *Arbeiter-Rat* no. 36, 1920. On the congress, see also Tosstorff 2004, p. 300.

The First Works Council Congress 1920

That, however, lay in the future. In the autumn of 1920, Müller devoted himself primarily to his work at the Works Council Centre on Münzstrasse in Berlin. It had taken over publishing the *Arbeiter-Rat* in February 1920 and its chief preoccupation was finding a balance between the works council movement and unions that mostly saw councils as a threat to their mandate of representing the workers.³⁶ However, cooperation was at least occasionally possible at the local level: in Berlin, for example, the Works Council Centre was supported by the regional union organisations. But the conflict on the role of the works councils sparked infighting within the USPD. In July 1920, it reached a point where Müller complained in an open letter that the editorial staff of the party organ, *Freiheit*, had delayed or simply not printed his articles on the debate around the works councils, deliberately sabotaging his position that the councils should organise in cooperation with, but independent of, the unions.³⁷ On the other hand, many unionists and moderate USPD representatives wanted to incorporate the works councils as subordinate bodies in the union structure. A final decision on the relationship between works councils and unions was made at the first national conference of German works councils that had been set up by the Works Councils Act. It was held from 5–7 October 1920 in the *Neue Welt* event hall at Hermannplatz in Berlin's Neukölln district. Richard Müller planned to recommend the Berlin model of independent works council organising as the way forward for the entire Republic. The Reichskommissar für die Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung, a kind of domestic intelligence agency within the Weimar Republic, considered the Works Council Centre's preparations for the conference important enough to warrant recording them in a weekly status report. These stated that the Berlin centre had 'worked out a plan of action whose adoption would amount to a call for the final struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat to commence immediately'.³⁸ This assessment may not have been so far from Müller's actual hopes. But they were not to be fulfilled.

At the works council congress, Richard Müller and the communist Heinrich Brandler spoke for the left union opposition – a convergence that would

³⁶ The publisher had moved to the Works Council Centre's offices at Münzstrasse 24 following the publication of the double issue no. 5/6; with issue no. 11 in March 1920, the Works Council Centre also officially began publishing the *Arbeiter-Rat*.

³⁷ *Freiheit* no. 292, July 23, 1920.

³⁸ Reichskommissar für die Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung, *Lagebericht vom Oktober 1920*, BArch R1507/2003, p. 6.

intensify later. The congress was tumultuous, characterised by a strong revolutionary mood that was only heightened by the lengthy greetings from a Soviet delegation. Despite this, Müller's rival, Robert Dissmann, was successful again: his proposal that the works councils be subordinated to the unions prevailed.³⁹ Dissmann understood quite well how to use revolutionary rhetoric and aggressive criticism of capitalism to draw the delegates to support resolutions that were far from revolutionary, in this case effectively subordinating the works council movement to the leadership of the class-collaborationist ADGB executive. The delegates could hardly grasp the far-reaching consequences of their decision: it was, in fact, the end of an independent council movement in Germany.

Richard Müller was unsparing in his criticism. He had expected little at the congress and it lived down to these low expectations. In the *Arbeiter-Rat* he described the congress as a 'comedy of union bureaucrats' who indulged in a mixture of reformist demands and 'revolutionary catchphrases'. According to him, it had been staged from the outset with the sole objective of stifling 'any free, independent works-council movement or activity'. Having subordinated works councils to the ADGB and appealed to the bourgeois parliament, Müller thought it 'bloody nonsense' for Dissmann to describe the state apparatus as a tool of the 'organised power of enterprise' and call for revolutionary struggle. Despite the rhetoric, the works councils were only allowed sham independence. Citing the very organisational designs proposed at the congress, Müller demonstrated that final decision-making power in all fundamental matters lay in the hands of the ADGB's executive board. In doing so, Müller compared the results to those of the first national council congress of December 1918: there too council delegates had not been aware of their responsibility to the Revolution and had simply given up the power of the workers who elected them to parliamentary institutions, effectively committing political suicide.

Despite this extremely negative assessment, Müller insisted that the course of the Revolution would not be stopped by government decrees or congress resolutions. He awkwardly prophesised that, 'As a stage in the proletariat's world-historical struggle, the works council congress of social-democratic labour unions and its resolutions will soon fall victim to collective amnesia'.⁴⁰ Once again, Richard Müller compensated for a political defeat with hope for a revolutionary course of world history. Between 1918 and 1921, the German Revolution was rich with half measures and, at decisive moments, Müller

³⁹ *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des Ersten Reichskongresses der Betriebsräte Deutschlands, Abgehalten vom 5.-7. Oktober 1920 zu Berlin*, Berlin 1920.

⁴⁰ *Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 43/44, 1920; see also no. 40, 1920.

always found himself on the side of revolutionary initiatives that either sank into indecision or were violently suppressed.

The defeat in October 1920 also affected Müller personally. With his resolution, Dissmann had not only achieved a political victory, but also destroyed the work that Müller had done in the months preceding. The Works Council Centre built through so much effort was abruptly demoted from the status of a model to that of a local oddity. Müller's call to his Berlin comrades to disregard the congress's decision and continue their work as independent Works Council Central went unheeded. Even the Berlin metalworkers, who had previously always supported Müller, were unwilling to isolate themselves from the rest of the union movement by sticking up for their local institution. They rejected Müller's call at a works council assembly.⁴¹ Signs of disintegration were not long in coming. In December 1920, the right wing of the USPD quit the Works Council Centre and planned to establish its own union works council centre with the majority social democrats.⁴² That left Müller's Centre with only the communists and the left wing of the USPD; it would now develop into an internal organ of the KPD. By 14 December 1920, the Reichskommissar für die Überwachung der Öffentlichen Ordnung had given it the dual title 'Communist Labour Union Centre (Works Council Centre in Münzstrasse)'.⁴³

Müller and the left also lost influence within the DMV, where Dissmann had consolidated his authority. In November 1920, he even managed to bring the union into the 'Iron Trades Federation', a lobby organisation for the German metal industry. Although the executive board vehemently denied it, this meant entering into one of those 'collaborationist boards' (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft*) between companies and unions – a step which the DMV had previously rejected vehemently (the only large union to do so). Rather than staying with the council system, the DMV now functionally supported class collaboration. In the following edition of the *Arbeiter-Rat*, Richard Müller had to admit that, 'Every method that was used to revolutionise the unions, every attempt to break Legien's power has produced nothing. This is partly because Dissmann and his comrades are not revolutionaries but only purveyors of empty phrases. But it is also because any compromise with Legien strengthens his position'.⁴⁴ Using verbal radicalism as well as targeted tactical

⁴¹ See 'Der vereinsamte Leichenmüller', *Vorwärts* no. 52, October 26, 1920.

⁴² Reichskommissar für die Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung, status report dated December 12, 1920. BArch, R 1507/2003.

⁴³ Reichskommissar für die Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung, status report dated December 14, 1920. BArch, R 1507/2003.

⁴⁴ *Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 45/46, 1920, p. 9.

compromises, the large unions were able to dissuade most of their members from engaging in open opposition.

The State of the Revolution in 1920

The lines quoted above are from an article that Müller wrote in late 1920 called 'Labour Movement Issues of the Day', in which he assessed the state of the Revolution to date. Starting with the observation that the movement was politically retreating and a union-supported form of capitalism was starting to be more firmly established, Müller turned his attention to the other symptoms of crisis. Economically, Germany was close to national bankruptcy due to its rapidly growing national debt, the weakness of its currency on international markets, and the additional burdens of the Treaty of Versailles. Production, he said, was also in a disastrous state due to a lack of raw materials and sales and the political situation was one of open civil war in which right-wing socialists, unions, and a large number of workers were tragically aligned with capital and the union bureaucracy had veritably turned into the 'last bulwark of the bourgeoisie'.

By late 1920, Müller's analyses of the economic situation were already enumerating with astounding clarity and precision the causes that would lead, through hyperinflation, to an unprecedented collapse of the German economy in 1923. What he could not foresee, however, was that the total depreciation of the currency was the tool by which the government and large-scale industry were able to line their pockets at the expense of the working class, the petit bourgeoisie, and the middle class. Nor could he predict the intervention of major US banks that ultimately re-established Germany's solvency with new credit in 1924.

In late 1920, Müller and the revolutionary left were confronted with the fact that an economic crisis of unheard-of proportions was developing while capitalism, from a political perspective, was becoming more stable. The collaborative boards between unions and large industry were a crucial part of that development. On an ideological level, social democracy and its business-friendly trajectory were again gaining ground due, among other things, to verbal concessions that were being made on all fronts regarding socialisation and socialism without any concrete steps being taken to implement them. Müller saw this 'phrase-mongering' as the main problem. He tried to change the mood by emphasising just how critical the situation still was and enumerating the 'old sins' of the unions during the war. Economic collapse in particular, which he had regarded as a major threat to the Revolution in late 1918, now

appeared to him a virtual guarantee of the Revolution's further development on a global scale. The emphasis on the crisis, but particularly the stabilisation of the Revolution in Soviet Russia, therefore compensated for the success that had eluded him. 'The radiant red in Europe's East', he wrote, 'makes the hearts of all workers beat out of pure spontaneous feeling for Soviet Russia'.⁴⁵ This was another reason why he set his hopes on an anticipated new Moscow union international as the motor of worldwide revolution.

For Germany, however, Müller had to acknowledge that the results of the works council congress that October were a defeat. By integrating the councils into the state and union apparatus, the congress's decisions also marked the decline of the revolutionary council movement. The labour movement's political initiative once again lay entirely in the hands of the political parties. By taking over leadership of the KPD's national labour union centre in December 1920, Richard Müller too was transformed from a council activist to a party politician.

45 Ibid., p. 2. Klaus Kinner argues that the idea of the postwar crisis as a dead end and final crisis of capitalism was one of the three fundamental premises in the emergence phase of global communism. The other two are the conviction of the superiority of socialist economic organisation and the claim that the October Revolution represented the beginning of a worldwide revolutionary process. See Kinner 1999b.

CHAPTER 9

From Council Socialism to Party Communism and Beyond: 1920–24

Although Richard Müller had been a member of the USPD since 1917 and had even contested the October 1918 Reichstag elections on its ticket, his political home had always been the DMV and the council movement. He was not a major figure at USPD party conferences. He would occasionally speak briefly on union issues but, unlike his friend Ernst Däumig, he was not a part of the party leadership.¹ However, as the council movement began to drift into the sands of the works councils after 1920, and Müller lost his position as editor of the DMV's central newspaper, party politics became the only way to continue his struggle for council socialism. Müller was part of the USPD's left wing, and when it merged with the Communist Party in 1920, he became the coordinator of the KPD's union activities, until a factional dispute ended his career in the party too. This was also the end of his work in the labour movement as a whole. This chapter will follow Müller's path from council socialism to party communism and reconstruct why he eventually could not accept the theory and politics of the still-nascent Marxism-Leninism.

The Leninist Model and the USPD Split

Müller and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards were the most influential left tendency among USPD workers, but they could not parlay that influence into real power within the party. That became clear when they lost to the party's executive board during the internal crisis of December 1918. Müller and the Stewards had refused to run on a slate with the moderate Hugo Haase in the national assembly elections, but could not get enough support from the rank and file for a more radical slate. They had hoped to strengthen the council socialists and to

¹ USPD – Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des außerordentlichen Parteitags vom 2. bis 6. März 1919 in Berlin, p. 45; USPD – Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des außerordentlichen Parteitags in Halle vom 12. bis 17. Oktober 1920, p. 439, unaltered reprints of both protocols in: USPD 1976. The third party conference in Berlin on 2–6 March, 1919 occurred in the middle of the Müller-led March strike and so he had no time to make a significant contribution.

limit the influence of moderates willing to cooperate with the majority SPD – but failed. As David Morgan pointed out, the Stewards lacked a well-developed programme and were inexperienced in party politics: Georg Ledebour and Ernst Däumig were their only two long-serving party politicians.² Moreover, the Shop Stewards had never taken great interest in party politics. For them, politics happened at the grassroots level. Councils and unions were their vehicles of choice in class struggle and they initially saw the USPD only as an organising platform.

It was the defeat of the revolutionary wave of November 1918 that transformed Müller willy-nilly into a party politician. Its chief lesson, as also that of the suppression of the local council republics and the March strikes of 1919 was that the revolutionary left needed an active revolutionary organisation that was able to act on the national level. This was when Müller and his group converted to Leninism. At first, they sought to reconcile the Leninist-style primacy of the party with their council-democratic foundations. In an article published in September 1920, Müller assigned the party the leading role as an 'integrating and guiding centre' of the union-party-council triumvirate. He used Russia's Communist Party as a model. The party, he argued, should dominate the councils as well as the unions intellectually, but not organisationally: 'A political party that wants to lead the working masses must also endeavour to guide and govern the council organisation intellectually as we, according to our party program, have done until now and as the Third International now urges'.³

At this time, Müller considered both the Bolsheviks' dominance in Soviet Russia and the USPD's dominance within the German workers' councils to be deeply legitimate and he did not see his turn towards Leninism in any way contradicting his previous work. His equation of the political practices of the USPD and the Russian Communist Party was also a product of the evolution of his personal relationship with the USPD. Whereas during the World War he and his Shop Stewards had viewed the party merely as an instrumental ally, he now identified more clearly with its goals and its claim to political leadership

2 Morgan considers this lack of influence on the Shop Stewards' part to be critical to the USPD's subsequent history: 'With a credible programme and shrewd political leadership, [the Shop Stewards] could have mounted a formidable threat to the established direction, or even the existence, of the USPD. Their lack of these assets, then and later, was important for the history of the party': Morgan 1975, p. 211.

3 Richard Müller, 'Partei, Gewerkschaften und Räte in der 3. Internationale', *Freiheit* no. 384, 15 September 1920.

and sought to bring the USPD in line with the guiding principles of the Third International.⁴

However, he never called for the dictatorship of the proletariat to be converted into a dictatorship of one party. For him, ‘intellectual guidance’ did not amount to submission to party directives. For Müller, the phrase ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ had always included organisationally independent councils and unions.⁵ The fact that developments in Soviet Russia were actually moving in the opposite direction would become clear to him and many others only later.

The USPD had decided to affiliate to the Third International (later called the Comintern) at its Leipzig party conference in 1919 but the issue was also intensely debated at the party’s Halle conference the following year. For one thing, the *Twenty-One Conditions* that Lenin had formulated in the interim became the focus of conflict in the schism that followed. However, they were not its sole cause. As we saw in the previous chapter, differences between the right and left wings of the USPD had hardened in the months before the conference, though they were played out in other theatres, such as the DMV or the works council movement.⁶ Political differences within the international left generated by the course of the Bolshevik revolution would also contribute to the split when it came. Richard Müller supported the affiliation with the Third International and his engagement in the conflict that ensued was determined by two factors: his experience with the politics of the USPD party executive during the Kapp Putsch and his ongoing conflict with Robert Dissmann within the DMV.⁷

The *Twenty-One Conditions* required a strict rejection of reformism and obligated all member parties of the new International to adopt the centralised party model and to cede most of their autonomy to the International. The motion by the left wing of the USPD accepted these requirements in a resolution: ‘Within the new International, there can be no more question of party autonomy as we have previously known it. Each member party must give up a portion of its autonomy and adapt itself fully to the requirements of

⁴ See Müller’s article, ‘Der Popanz der Gewerkschaftsspaltung’, in *Freiheit* no. 378, 11 September 1920, in which he also emphasises the continuity between the Third International’s guiding principles and the USPD’s programme. He claims that the USPD is ultimately entitled ‘to give the labour movement its content, direction, and objective’.

⁵ See also von Oertzen 1976, p. 106.

⁶ On the schism within the USPD, see Krause 1975, pp. 132–216.

⁷ USPD – Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des außerordentlichen Parteitags in Halle vom 12. bis 17. Oktober 1920, pp. 34f.



Müller at USPD Party Conference in Halle, October 1920.

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the international organisation of struggle'. Ernst Däumig was the first to sign the resolution, followed by Richard Müller, Paul Scholze, Heinrich Malzahn, Paul Weyer, Paul Wegmann, and Paul Eckert from among the Shop Stewards' delegates.⁸

Although the Shop Stewards had ceased to exist as an organisation during the January uprising of 1919, many of their members continued as a political network within the USPD and the Berlin Works Council Centre. But not all of the old Stewards agreed on the Third International. Emil Barth, who had been badly estranged from his former comrades since his time as a people's deputy, voted against the resolution and so did Georg Ledebour. But most of Müller's old comrades supported it, as did a majority of the delegates.⁹ The motion carried with 236 votes to 156.

However, this clear majority was not accepted by the party as a whole. Instead, the decision became the ultimate cause of the split. Long and painful debates had preceded the vote. The representative of the new International, the Bolshevik Grigory Zinoviev, gave a four-and-a-half-hour speech only to be

⁸ USPD – Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des außerordentlichen Parteitags in Halle vom 12. bis 17. Oktober 1920, pp. 78–9.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 259f.

countered by Rudolf Hilferding's three-hour speech. Tensions mounted further when Julius Martov, the Russian Menshevik leader who had come to Berlin just to speak to the delegates, lamented the persecution of his moderate socialist party and the murder of his comrades during the Red Terror. At this, the USPD's moderate wing, which could not in any case accept the *Twenty-One Conditions*, expelled the left majority and left the hall, splitting the party.¹⁰

The Communist Union Centre

Though a merger of the USPD and the KPD had been proposed at the Halle conference, the USPD left hung back from it, concentrating instead on a separation process for two months before it eventually merged with the KPD to form the Vereinigte Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (United Communist Party of Germany). During the interim period, Müller became a member of the central committee of the USPD's left wing, whose meetings concerned themselves mainly with organisational questions such as the status of its caucus, the search for new party offices and the struggle to control the party's press.

Some substantial issues also emerged. An antiparliamentary turn that would have been inconceivable in the old USPD became apparent as the guidelines for the party's upcoming work were being drawn up. Drafts described the Reichstag as a 'bourgeois tool of repression' and loftily declared that, 'We do not want to win over the parliament, but defeat and eliminate it'. The drafts required the party's parliamentary representatives to lodge written commitments with party headquarters undertaking to resign their seats in the event of a conflict between themselves and the party leadership. Only Emil Eichhorn and Joseph Herzfeld fought against that proposal.¹¹

Richard Müller did not involve himself in that critical discussion about the new party structures and was often absent from the meetings. His focus was on the works councils and he only intervened in central committee discussions substantially when the councils were brought up. His position was that, despite the defeat of the left at the Berlin union congress in October 1920, the party should support the preservation of independent works councils. The members of the works councils, however, were also urged to be more active in unions. The minutes show that the USPD left wanted the Works Council Centre to 'develop

¹⁰ See also Leonhard 1981, pp. 171–81.

¹¹ Minutes of meetings of the central administration or the central committee, partially in conjunction with KPD representatives, Oct.–Dec. 1920, SAPMO-BArch, RY 19/II/143/5, 27 October meeting.

into a Communist cell of the works councils and lead the caucus of communist works councils within the union movement'. And so it soon did under the new title of Reichsgewerkschaftszentrale (literally the National Union Centre). Not surprisingly, it came to be referred to as the Communist Union Centre, in particular by the police and government intelligence.¹² The central committee also approved money, on Müller's request, for the construction of a council school that, according to Däumig's proposal, might one day be expanded into a party school.¹³ Apart from that, Müller committed himself to editing a newsletter for the communist opposition within the unions and to collaborating on the creation of a bi-weekly flyer for agitating among the unemployed.¹⁴

Though it is unclear whether the flyer for the unemployed ever materialised, Richard Müller's work certainly kept the Works Council Centre buzzing. Within a few weeks of the USPD split, the state security apparatus had to acknowledge the brisk activity around it:

The struggle for the unions is in full swing... The unions' activities in that struggle are directed primarily against the so-called Communist cells. The Communist union centre ([Works Council Centre on Münzstrasse]), in which Geschke, Neumann, Malzahn, Felix Hirsch, Schumann, Richard Müller, and Sylt, who has grown quite popular among the left-wing radicals, play a significant part, has recently issued an open call to workers, particularly metalworkers, in all shops and unions to create such cells in the form of specifically Communist factions and has engaged in extensive propaganda aimed at generating a Communist spirit within the unions. Trained agitators, first and foremost, the Communist shop stewards of the large Berlin companies, are now being sent throughout the country to do the Muscovites' work within the unions.¹⁵

Richard Müller was elected chairman of the Reichsgewerkschaftszentrale (RGZ, hereinafter, Communist Union Centre) at the founding conference of the VKPD, effectively putting him in charge of coordinating all communist union

¹² Ibid., 18 November 1920 meeting.

¹³ The council school was an already existing institution near the Works Council Centre. See the May–June 1920 syllabus and a commentary on the council school's mission in the *Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 14, 1920.

¹⁴ Ibid., 18, 22, and 29 November 1920 meetings.

¹⁵ Status report of the Reichskommissar für Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung, 14 December 1920, SAPMO BArch R 1507/2003.

activities. It was a big task and Müller decided to focus on that exclusively, and did not run for the central committee of the United Communist Party.

The newsletter of the communist opposition within the unions that Müller had committed to editing was first published in January 1921. Just as the Communist Union Centre was simply the refurbished Works Council Centre, the newsletter was simply the *Arbeiter-Rat* fused with the corresponding Communist publication, the *Kommunistische Rätekorrespondenz* (Communist Council Correspondence). It appeared under the title *Der Kommunistische Gewerkschafter* (The Communist Unionist).¹⁶ For reasons that remain unknown, Fritz Heckert soon took over editing, however, and Richard Müller only wrote for it occasionally as a guest author.

The refurbishment of the Works Council Centre to create the Communist Union Centre and the fusion of *Arbeiter-Rat* with the communist paper to create the *Kommunistische Gewerkschafter* are only two examples of the extent to which the Communist Party benefited from the structures of the council movement. The name change from *Arbeiter-Rat* to *Kommunistischer Gewerkschafter* was symbolic of the connection between the decline of the council movement and the KPD's ascent to major party status.¹⁷ But apart from the structures, the merged party did not take up the tradition of the USPD's independent socialism and soon dropped the name 'United Communist Party' to revert to KPD. The Communist ascendancy was reflected not only in the political trajectory of Richard Müller and the Shop Stewards but also signified the movement of an entire tendency among left-socialist workers toward communism.¹⁸

The contradiction between the council concept that arose during the German Revolution and the Bolshevik party tradition characterised by the *Twenty-One Conditions* remained latent because Bolshevik Russia was nominally a soviet republic, i.e., the world's first council republic. It generated a mood of euphoric awakening and unity in which it was possible to overlook

¹⁶ *Der Kommunistische Gewerkschafter*, no. 1, 1921, p. 1; *Der Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 51/52, 1920. See also Opel 1957, p. 113.

¹⁷ In his preface, Däumig had described the *Arbeiter-Rat* tendency as 'more or less an isolated crowd', reflecting the defeat at the national conference of works councils in October 1920, where the ideas of the *Arbeiter-Rat* and its programme of independent works councils had been rejected by the majority of rank-and-file delegates. With that statement, Däumig acknowledged the end of the council movement. The KPD saw its current of communist unionism as a new mass movement in which old ideas were integrated. See *Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 51/52, 1920.

¹⁸ See also the articles 'Dem Arbeiter-Rat zum Abschied' [A Farewell to the *Arbeiter-Rat*] by Max Sievers and 'Abschieds- und Geleitwort' [Farewell and Preface] by Ernst Däumig in the final issue of the *Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 51/52, 1920.

past differences and emphasise commonalities even in the face of revolutionary defeat.¹⁹ Ill omens such as Martov's speech at the Halle party conference were quickly forgotten.

The Red International of Labour Unions

Until March 1921, the Communist Union Centre was primarily concerned with laying the groundwork for a 'Red International of Labour Unions' that was to supersede the social-democratic Amsterdam International. An 'International Council of Trade and Industrial Associations' had already been established the previous year in Moscow and was enlisting members as the 'Moscow International'. It was to be officially launched in the summer of 1921.

The very first edition of the *Kommunistischer Gewerkschafter* included an article by Richard Müller advocating the new international and contrasting it with the old international on the basis of reports from the bourgeois press on the latter's London conference. Half sympathetically, half condescendingly, these reports described the 'workers' representatives, with their bourgeois clothes and good grooming', as 'mild socialists'. The reporter regarded them as 'anything but a band of revolutionary conspirators'. With the help of portrayals such as these, it was not difficult for Müller to argue that the Amsterdam International lacked fighting capacity. To him, the ineffectiveness of its decisions and its ponderous reformism amounted to deliberate sabotage of the class struggle: 'If we consider the decisions passed by the London conference, we find that they were not made by "mild socialists", but by people who are not socialists at all, people who hate revolutionary class struggle'. Their intention to hand over preparations for socialisation to the International Labour Office, an organ of bourgeois governments, was a glaring illustration of their real politics. So, Müller urged, the revolutionary proletariat should 'not... allow these agents of the bourgeoisie to build a following but instead... affiliate with Moscow's Council of Trade and Industrial Associations'.²⁰

The newspaper's fifth issue included an appeal from the Communist Union Centre in the form of an 'Open Letter' calling on communists to engage in the

¹⁹ See, for example, the call for unity entitled 'An die revolutionären Arbeiter Deutschlands' [To the Revolutionary Workers of Germany], in which not only USPD and KPD, but also KAPD members were called upon to participate in a united Communist party, *Der Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 43/44, 1920.

²⁰ Richard Müller: 'Der Amsterdamer Gewerkschaftsbund und seine Konferenzen', *Der Kommunistische Gewerkschafter*, no. 1, 1921, pp. 8f.

works councils and ‘mobilise the entire working class for its immediate interests’ in the coming works council elections. The appeal described the model communist works council delegate as one who disregarded the restrictive Works Councils Act: ‘The constraints of Article 106 of the Works Councils Act do not exist for him. Above all, its duty is to serve the interests of its class’.²¹ This was in line with Müller’s previous calls to go beyond the restrictions of the Works Councils Act at the first works council congress the previous year. The general focus on workplace struggle and bolstering direct engagement with the rank and file was also in line with the contemporary Open Letter Policy. The ‘Open Letter’ was issued by Paul Levi and the KPD party executive in January 1921 and called on the SPD, what remained of the USPD and the unions to create a united front against the rollback of revolutionary achievements.²² The idea was not a coalition with the other two parties and their moderate or, in the case of the SPD, still nationalist leadership. Instead, Levi wanted to appeal to the rank and file of the SPD, USPD and the unions, indicate that the KPD was open to working-class unity, and make them aware of the demands for socialisation that were still not met. The Open Letter signified a rejection of the sectarian and putschist impulses of the early KPD in favour of a long-term strategy for assuming leadership of the working class by concentrating on bread-and-butter issues facing workers and their families. In the past these issues had been effectively ignored on the assumption that only a successful revolution could improve living conditions, handing the field of social politics entirely to the SPD. The Communists now stopped limiting themselves to pure propaganda and challenged the SPD with their bid to unite against liberal and conservative forces. The idea was to push for smaller demands, but to use those to mobilise workers and create an atmosphere that would allow for further radicalisation.

As an old unionist with deep sympathies with the imperatives that ruled working-class lives, Richard Müller found this turn by the party executive, jointly led by his old comrade Ernst Däumig and the former Spartacist activist Paul Levi, very congenial. The Open Letter precisely reflected the mixture of revolutionary zeal and realpolitik that the Shop Stewards had operated with during the war. The majority of the workers, however, remained unconvinced of the merits of joining the new ‘Moscow’ International. Although strong communist factions existed in almost every union, no union declared its support for the new project and the ADGB board was strictly opposed to Moscow, denouncing

²¹ *Der Kommunistische Gewerkschafter*, no. 5, 1921, p. 1.

²² *Rote Fahne*, 8 January 1921. On the united front policy of 1921, see also Weber 1969a, p. 41 and Kinner 1999a, pp. 42–51.

its communist members for fomenting disruption, and insisting that members 'fight these subversive efforts with all available means'.²³ Expulsions and disciplinary measures also prevented open discussion of communist positions. The DMV executive board even went so far as to boycott entire local units. The Halle DMV was a good example: because Communists had a majority in it, the DMV executive board simply refused to cooperate with the unit as a whole.²⁴

The ever well-informed Reichskommissar, responsible for monitoring public order, also commented on the conflict:

The fighting between the national headquarters of the red unions of Germany and the Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (ADGB) is growing increasingly intense. The national headquarters are making every effort to consolidate communist unionists' groups in Germany as quickly as possible. They would like to show them off at the Red International of Labour Unions in Moscow (in May of this year) and consummate their official affiliation with the International there.²⁵

These efforts would, however, bear no fruit. Even the November Revolution had not been able to pull German unions to the left and Müller and his newly founded Communist Union Centre also failed against the union bureaucrats' strong resistance. Not a single union affiliated itself as a whole with the Red International, nor were the Communists able to gain a majority in any German union.

The delegates to the founding convention of the Red International of Labour Unions that eventually took place in June 1921, therefore, had to be selected at special conferences of communist-minded members of each separate union. One such 'National Conference of Communist Metalworkers and those sympathetic to the Moscow Trade Union International' was held in Berlin on 28 February 1921. Richard Müller gave the opening presentation on 'The Tasks

²³ Decision of the tenth ADGB conference, cited in: *Der Kommunistische Gewerkschafter*, no. 7, 1921, p. 65.

²⁴ The *Kommunistische Gewerkschafter* commented on this ironically, stating that 'We know that the local administration of the Halle DMV is not recognised because it is made up of communists and because it has employees who, when filling out membership rosters, spelled all of the Karls with Cs rather than Ks, and because another employee is said to have kissed a girl in the office. (Who doesn't know Robert, the old angel of innocence?)' *Der Kommunistische Gewerkschafter*, no. 14, 1921. The wordplay on *Karl* and *Carl* refers to Karl Marx and Carl Legien, head of the executive board of the ADGB.

²⁵ Reichskommissar für Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung, March 1921 status report. BArch, R 1507/200, p. 18.

of the Union in Social Revolution'. He castigated the union bureaucracy for its business-friendly posture and the anti-communist smear campaign that it had carried out under cover of alleged 'political neutrality'. In particular, he included his personal adversary, Robert Dissmann, whom he branded as an anti-communist 'agitator in the ADGB'. At the same time, Müller also urgently warned against the slogan 'Out of the unions' and those advocating the establishment of syndicalist or any other type of leftist splinter unions in opposition to the Social Democratic mainstream of the union movement. The ADGB-unions should remain the 'focus for the efforts of the proletariat as a class' and communists could not afford to give up on them: they were the main arena for the 'struggle for the hearts and minds of the proletariat'. Müller's position mirrored the KPD's party line, 'into the unions', and its rejection of withdrawal and schisms.²⁶

Müller spoke with such fury that his colleague, Oskar Rusch, did not give his own speech 'due to Müller's exhausting arguments', and only read a prepared resolution instead. It protested the expulsion of communists from the DMV and its executive board's failure to recognise elections. The resolution and an additional explanatory statement prepared jointly by Rusch and Müller were adopted unanimously. They also urged delegates to support the united front policy of the Open Letter in the election. This policy was apparently not entirely undisputed among communist unionists and therefore Müller wanted to send a signal against far left and syndicalist tendencies within the KPD, though those were either not represented in the plenum or their representatives did not speak. Ironically, the communist unionists' repeatedly affirmed commitment to the unity of the union movement was clearly not shared by DMV officials: some delegates showed letters in which their local officials more or less threatened them with expulsion if they participated in the conference. Those who stood up to such intimidation and participated anyway felt vindicated in their judgment of the 'Amsterdammers' and their German representatives. The conference ended with the election of Richard Müller, Max Hausding from Chemnitz, and Jakob Greis from Wiesbaden as the DMV delegates to the Moscow conference.²⁷

The seriousness of the DMV hierarchy's threats became clear a short while later when it initiated expulsion proceedings against Müller as a conference

²⁶ See the VKPD headquarters' call 'Arbeiter! Genossen!', published on 29 January, 1921 in the *Kommunistischer Gewerkschafter* no. 4/1921.

²⁷ *Der Kommunistische Gewerkschafter*, no. 10, 1921, pp. 90f.; Tosstorff 2004, p. 216.

organiser because of his work for the Red International.²⁸ The proceedings were ultimately successful, though we do not know the exact date of the expulsion.²⁹ Müller, who had fought for workers' rights with the DMV since the days of the German Empire, who, even in war and revolution, had always fought for the unity of the union despite the most severe political conflicts, was eventually thrown out as soon as he openly expressed communist views. The accusation made against the communists was that they wanted to split the DMV – in fact, the split was caused by the executive board. If even declared supporters of union unity like Müller were not allowed to work within the DMV, it was more and more likely that the communist party would be driven towards establishing its own unions.

Crisis in the Communist Party and the March Action of 1921

The communist movement gained tremendously in members and influence by merging with the left USPD, which was more than three times as large. However, the political orientation of the USPD was sufficiently different that internal squabbles were inevitable in the new, larger, party. In particular, the long-term policy laid out in the Open Letter came increasingly under fire in early 1921. Ernst Däumig, Richard Müller's long-term political companion, and Paul Levi, had carved out a considerable portion of that strategy. Yet, despite a promising start, Däumig held office as KPD chairman for only eleven weeks before resigning over differences between the party leadership and the Third International, setting off a party crisis that would last through the following year.³⁰

As the euphoric mood of unity within the united KPD faded, fundamental conflicts between the old council activists and the USPD's left wing on one hand and the increasingly Bolshevikised KPD on the other also became apparent, as did simple jousting for power. The party was also under pressure from the Communist International in Moscow, which demanded a more aggressive

²⁸ Reichskommissar für Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung, 22 March 1921 status report, BArch, R 1507/2007, pp. 172f.

²⁹ Müller states this in a letter from 1924, see: *Richard Müller, Begründung der Beschwerde an das Exekutivkomitee der K.I.*, in: Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343; page 15.

³⁰ Morgan 1983, p. 327; Weber 1969, p. 41.

course, searched for allies within the party to pursue that course and found them among members who were moved by revolutionary impatience.³¹

The first result of the crisis was the resignation of Däumig and Levi as co-chairmen of the party. The Reichskommissar commented:

The brains of the party, such as they were, left with the leaving comrades. The newly elected VKPD leaders, Stoecker and Brandler, can only be described as small minds... These very comrades, particularly Stoecker, are absolutely committed to action... In sum, we can say that, the VKPD has gained a more radical and brutal leadership.³²

This ominous assessment would be confirmed soon enough. The new party leadership under Heinrich Brandler promptly abandoned the united front tactics of the Open Letter and swung toward a so-called 'offensive course', a commitment to action that was the outright opposite of the united front. Brandler and his supporters assumed that they were dealing with an acutely revolutionary situation and therefore rejected joint action with reformist tendencies as opportunist.³³ The high point, and catastrophe, of this actionism was what was known as the March Action of 1921 – an attempted armed uprising in which hundreds of workers died.

Revolutionary impatience in the left wing of the USPD and later the KPD provided fertile soil for the March Action, with numerous discussions about 'actions' and an impending 'strike' in the preceding months. The records of the Reichkommissar would also have us believe that Müller and Malzahn pushed for a 'final action' in the name of socialism that would have required the 'vigorous application of terror'.³⁴ Like the classification of Müller as a sympathiser of the radical syndicalist Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD), however,

³¹ On the mood, see the 11 January 1921 status report from the Reichskommissar für Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung, BArch R 1507/2004.

³² Reichskommissar für Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung, 1 March 1921 status report, BArch R 1507/2006.

³³ See Weber 1969a, p. 41. See also Becker 2001, pp. 126–42. Ironically, only two years later, Brandler became a leading protagonist of the united front policy after he had seen the failure of the offensive course.

³⁴ Reichskommissar für Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung, 2 November 1920 status report, BArch R 1507/2003. According to the report dated 15 March 1921, the shop stewards in Berlin's large companies demanded 'that the time has finally come to move on to real action' because the workers in the KAPD camp were threatening to change their affiliation. See BArch R 1507/2007.

these details must be deemed wildly inaccurate.³⁵ Overly hasty ‘final actions’ and putsch fantasies were always far from Müller’s mind and he subsequently defended the Open Letter policy despite considerable opposition.

The trigger for the March Action was the occupation of the Halle-Merseburg district, a communist stronghold, by the SiPo, short for Sicherheitspolizei, militarised police troops. The occupation provided the Communist Party with a welcome opportunity to put their new offensive course into action. The party’s executive board, with its new actionist leadership, called for armed conflict with the police, and the communist grassroots, already on edge due to provocation by the police and employers, responded willingly, leading to several days of bloody fighting. But the VKPD and KAPD members remained isolated. They were unable to either move their SPD colleagues to join the uprising or expand the fighting on more than a regional level. Military defeat was therefore only a matter of time: state provocation had succeeded and presented the executive board’s offensive course with an early and ignominious failure.³⁶

The ex-chairman Paul Levi subsequently condemned the action in a pamphlet called ‘Our Way: Against Putschism’. He attacked the party leadership harshly and accused the executive committee of the Comintern of having incited the March Action for reasons of Soviet domestic politics alone, paying no heed to circumstances in Germany.³⁷ Levi was immediately expelled from the party.

Despite his great reservations, Richard Müller had refused to oppose the action or criticise the uprising while the fighting was still ongoing. Although he did not publicly distance himself from it at first, he criticised the party leadership intensely from within on 30 March 1921 – a time when the military defeat of the uprising and its isolation had become obvious. At a meeting of the Communist Union Centre with two central committee representatives, he fought vehemently against plans to continue the offensive. He described the mood among the workers in Berlin vividly:

35 The report from the Reichskommissar für Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung dated 11 January 1921 reads, ‘Numerous new communists with little enthusiasm for Levi and his followers are certainly returning to the USPD on the grounds that the infighting in the VKPD has become nauseating to them. On the other hand, other groups are expressing a desire to move further to the left and are escaping to the revolutionary KAPD. This orientation’s current leaders are Stöcker, Geyer, and Richard Müller’: (BArch R 1507/2004). Müller in fact rejected the KAPD’s direction entirely; see Richard Müller: ‘Auf dem Wege zur KAPD’, *Sowjet*, no. 3/1921.

36 On the March Action, see Carr 1966, pp. 336–8; Weber 1991 and Koch-Baumgarten 1986.

37 Levi 1921.

We can't go into the workshops. If we did, we would be cut down. We metalworkers were well on our way to toppling the union leadership, but now we're in a very difficult position. The movement is dead in Berlin and it isn't coming back. Things here are already at the point where the workers themselves are demanding that the Sipo protect them from communists. We have workers fighting against workers. Our communists are arrested and the other workers are happy about it. And if this rallying cry [to continue the offensive] is heeded, our active comrades here in Berlin will soon be behind bars.³⁸

The party leadership, however, refused to view the situation realistically. It held 'defeatists' like Müller responsible for the failure, referring to a few local strikes and demanding that Müller call for a general strike in Berlin. Müller refused to comply and defended himself against the attack:

Some say that there are defeatists among us: I have to be honest with you. If I stood outside in the factory and I saw my comrades not answering the call despite my best efforts, as a communist, what would I do? Would I walk out alone? And abandon the factory? That would be insane! Our comrades are saying that if they walk out of the factory, they will have lost their influence among the workers. That's why they're not answering the call.³⁹

As during the war, when he was spokesman of the Shop Stewards, Müller now doggedly refused to support actions that were not backed by the workers. However, back then he had had a free hand within the USPD with no interference from the party leadership. In 1921, on the other hand, he was confronted with an intransigent central office whose representatives rejected his pragmatic tactics and glorified their own avant-garde offensive course with the assertion that there will be 'no struggle that the communists enter into in which they do not have to fight against a large portion of the workers'.⁴⁰

In remarks like these, Müller must have recognised a more arrogant version of the Liebknecht-style voluntarist 'revolutionary gymnastics' that he had

³⁸ Minutes of the 30 March 1921 meeting of the Communist Union Centre with the advisory council and two representatives from the central committee, SAPMO-BArch, RY 1/I 2/708/7. The Sicherheitspolizei (Sipo) was a paramilitary police force, staffed with former military personnel and employed to deal with political unrest and strikes.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

always rejected. The situation was similar to the January uprising of 1919: then a different actionist minority, including the Spartacists, had pressed ahead, leading to another bloody fiasco. Müller had decided not to distance himself publicly from the January uprising out of solidarity, but he refused to take part in what he saw as adventurism. He took the same position now – with the support of the majority in the Communist Union Centre. That body included many of the old Shop Stewards, who saw ‘no remotely political perspective’ in the party leaders’ position.⁴¹

The central committee of the KPD responded to the massive intra-party criticism with authoritarian purge-style measures. Their decisions may have been inspired by the prohibition on factions or tendencies and other restrictions on intra-party democracy that had recently been introduced in the Russian Communist Party in response to the Kronstadt uprising. Despite the bloody disaster that resulted from their actions, the KPD leadership later considered it a success that revived the party and had done away with ‘stagnation’.⁴²

Post-March Crises and ‘Made in Moscow’ Resolution

In April, Levi supporter Max Sievers, former editor of the *Arbeiter-Rat*, was removed from party headquarters and expulsion proceedings were initiated against Richard Müller and a certain F. Wolf of the Communist Union Centre.⁴³ But party headquarters was not strong enough to carry out the expulsion at this point.⁴⁴ Müller found himself in the company of many others who also opposed the party leadership, but he remained distant from Levi and his supporters, who criticised the KPD from the outside. Even so, the affair cost Müller his post as head of the Communist Union Centre.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See August Thalheimer’s 14 April letter to Karl Radek in Weber 1991, pp. 298–300. Thalheimer was certain that only a few people would ‘go overboard’ with Levi and ruthlessly ordered the removal of the ‘couple of people around him’. He was still unclear about the position of Däumig and Müller.

⁴³ Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 341. On Max Sievers’s life, see Jestrabek 2008, pp. 107–25.

⁴⁴ See Paul Levi’s 31 May 1921 letter to the central committee of the Third Congress of the Comintern in Weber 1991, pp. 303–13, particularly p. 311.

⁴⁵ Former Revolutionary Shop Stewards Paul Eckert, Heinrich Malzahn, and Paul Neumann were also removed; see Reichskommissar für Überwachung der öffentlichen Ordnung, 2 May 1921 status report, BArch R 1507/2009. In the preface to his first book, Müller confirms that he was at the forefront of the revolutionary movement until April 1921. Müller 1924a, p. 45.

The expulsion was not enforced right away: it became the subject of passionate debates and many officials, including the Shop Steward Paul Eckert, Müller's colleague in the Communist Union Centre, appealed to higher authorities. They wrote letters to Lenin and the Comintern to put pressure on the German party leadership and succeeded: against the will of the KPD leadership, the opposition was able to send five representatives of the intra-party opposition to accompany the German delegation to the Third World Congress of the Comintern in June 1921 to clarify their perspective.⁴⁶ The opposition delegates were Richard Müller, Paul Neumann, Heinrich Malzahn, Paul Franken, and Clara Zetkin.⁴⁷

The party leaders tried to win Lenin over to their aggressive stance and isolate the opposition prior to the congress – but they failed: Lenin condemned the March Action as a washout based on a provocation and ordered the party to return to its united front tactics of earlier that year. This also included working with communists in unions with reformist majorities, another critical point of contention between the leadership and the opposition.⁴⁸

The Comintern congress itself began on June 22 in Moscow.⁴⁹ For Richard Müller and his comrades it must have been a profound experience to see that 'Radiant red of Europe's East'⁵⁰ with their own eyes for the first time. For them, Moscow was not just a potential ally in party infighting. For communists around the world in 1921, Moscow meant a dream realised, the start of the worldwide victory of the Revolution. A trip to Moscow was a journey into the future. For the five members of the German opposition, however, that euphoria was combined with deep concerns about the bleak condition of their party, torn apart by intrigue and power struggles.

The March Action was also discussed at the congress, where it exemplified a larger crisis. The communist movement as a whole was groping for an assessment: Was the revolutionary wave that had been unleashed in 1917 still underway, making aggressive tactics necessary, or was the worldwide situation

⁴⁶ Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 364.

⁴⁷ Zetkin 1957, p. 42; see also Clara Zetkin's 20 June 1921 letter to Paul Levi in: Weber 1991 pp. 313–18.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 225–7.

⁴⁹ According to a personal questionnaire that Müller filled out himself, he arrived on 20 June 1921 with a mandate for a union congress. It was the founding congress of the Red International of Labour Unions. The Third World Congress of the Comintern met at the same time, so Müller could be present as part of the oppositional delegation. See: Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343.

⁵⁰ Richard Müller's own words in the *Arbeiter-Rat* no. 45/46, 1920.

unsuitable for revolution, requiring forces to assemble in a united front? This distinction ran right down the middle of the German delegation, where Clara Zetkin and Heinrich Malzahn spoke for the opposition, supported by factual reports from Müller, Neumann, and Franken.⁵¹ Ernst Reuter, Fritz Heckert, and Wilhelm Koenen defended the offensive theory in the plenum. Lenin also spoke on the issue: he stuck by his united front position and criticised the German party leadership's line. The congress went along with his judgment.⁵²

After the congress, Clara Zetkin arranged a personal reception with Lenin for the five opposition members on 9 July. Lenin was quite impressed by the meeting, describing the 'German proletarians like Malzahn and his friends' as 'marvellous fellows' who, although they would never 'appear as fire eaters at a radical word carnival', were nonetheless a 'supportive, sustaining force in the factories and the unions'. His final verdict: 'We have to assemble people like these. They connect us to the masses'.⁵³

Lenin and Trotsky's mediation efforts unified the German delegation on the same day, confirming it with a formal 'peace treaty' between the party leadership and the opposition. The treaty bound its signatories to the decisions of the third congress and called on all party members to work together regardless of their previous stances. If this appeared news for the opposition, who until the congress had faced expulsion, the agreement also prohibited 'faction building and separate endeavours' within the party, forbade party members to collaborate with press organs outside the party, and entrusted its parliamentary delegation to the 'control and discipline' of the party leadership.⁵⁴ Such provisions meant that the Bolsheviks had effectively facilitated the takeover of the party by authoritarian centralist ideas, a process that had already started with the *Twenty-One Conditions*. Although Lenin had sided with the opposition, the very fact that he had to settle the German party crisis set a precedent for the Bolsheviks' authority to issue instructions to the members of the Third International.

The long-awaited founding congress of what was to become the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) also took place in Moscow alongside the Third World Congress of the Third International. The founding member

⁵¹ Clara Zetkin wrote to Paul Levi from Moscow on 20 June: 'Our little flag on both uprights was valuably strengthened by Fr[anken] and R[ichard] M[üller]. The facts through which the union leaders supported us are of the utmost importance and potent power. And everyone is carrying themselves not just bravely but wisely'. Clara Zetkin's 20 June 1921 letter to Paul Levi, in Weber 1991 pp. 313–18.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 229–31.

⁵³ Zetkin 1957, pp. 42–4.

⁵⁴ Weber 1991, p. 234.

organisations were syndicalist unions sympathetic to the October Revolution (Spain's CNT, for example), communist Russian unions, and communist union factions from Western Europe. The objective was to form a global platform for revolutionary unionism.⁵⁵

The KPD delegates to the world congress and the German union members who joined them appeared jointly as the German delegation and the conflict over the offensive course vs. a united front was replayed as the German delegation considered whether the numerous communist union members who had been expelled by the AGBD in Germany should start their own organisations. Fritz Heckert described the prospect of a rapid communist takeover of the unions as illusory, claiming that union bureaucrats still had the upper hand. Therefore, organisational alternatives had to be offered to the expelled communists so that they would not 'fall into the hands of the syndicalists and anarchists' who wanted to destroy the unions. Heckert offered to temporarily organise the expelled members so as to effect their reabsorption into the unions.

Standing against fragmentation of the union movement as he always had, Richard Müller insisted on the Comintern congress's decisions prohibiting special organisations. Such temporary organisations would also be vilified by union bureaucrats as attempts to divide unions in a way that would prove useful to their opponents. 'The bureaucracy', he said, 'will use our actions to overcome the serious crisis it is in right now'. This would be easy because, as Müller emphasised, the communists did not control the union press, the social democrats did. The communist unionists did not command millions of copies of newspapers as their opponents did and they therefore had to refrain from any kind of provocation: the SPD's control over the working-class media would allow its interpretation of events to prevail. Also, once started, even special organisations for expelled members could acquire their own internal logic that was not to be underestimated. They would become independent and could cause future splits. Heinrich Malzahn and Paul Neumann, among others, supported Müller's argument, but there was no consensus. The divisions had hardened and a good dose of mistrust was still seething under the cover of the peace treaty. On 16 July, discussions were ultimately broken off after three meetings and a vote was held: the establishment of new organisations was rejected 28 votes to 16 (with two abstentions).⁵⁶

⁵⁵ On the founding congress of the RILU, see Tosstorff 2004, pp. 314–370. An English translation of this work is scheduled for publication in 2015.

⁵⁶ German delegation meetings on 10, 12, and 16 July in *Materialien über die Entstehung der RGO*, SAPMO-BArch, RY 23/45.

Nonetheless, the issue was back on the table the following day. The losers claimed that the conference would not support the German resolution and that Lenin himself had spoken in favour of integrating the expelled members into the Gelsenkirchen wing of the syndicalist Free Workers Union (FAU) – a tendency named after the city of Gelsenkirchen, but not limited to it, which was moving away from syndicalism and towards Marxism.⁵⁷ Also, the congress had received a resolution proposed by Heckert on this issue and apparently it had not been withdrawn. Richard Müller fought against the very principle of foreign delegations interfering with the internal affairs of the German labour movement. Moreover, it seemed to him that Lenin was often informed in a ‘very one-sided’ way.

Richard Müller and Heinrich Malzahn wrote to Lenin describing their view of the conflict in an attempt to reach a definitive resolution. They described the syndicalist unions as counterrevolutionary, one of them, the General Workers Union in Berlin, having even stooped to scab labour. The expelled members had admitted that their own impropriety was partly to blame for their expulsion and in many cases had already been readmitted, they wrote. ‘If unions are established for the expelled members in Germany’, they concluded, ‘it would mark the beginning of a split in the German union movement, which would in turn make it impossible for communists to work in it’.⁵⁸

In a cautious reply two days later, Lenin clarified that he had only briefly discussed the matter with Heckert, whose proposals had initially seemed sensible to him. He was not sufficiently well informed about the details of the situation in Germany, however, and he did not know ‘what tactless misdemeanours individual communists committed to make it easier for the social traitors to expel them’. He went on to ask rhetorically, ‘What are unions?’, and reiterated his lack of familiarity with the complex labyrinth of mutually estranged syndicalist

57 The FAU Gelsenkirchen was one of the largest and most powerful unions with, according to press reports, 110,000 members in 1921 who were by no means restricted to the city of Gelsenkirchen. The localised name served much more to designate a political tendency that was distinct from the anarchist Free Workers’ Union of Germany (FAUD). Arising from the General Miners’ Union and parts of the FAUD, it had gradually shifted from syndicalism to Marxism and had a very close relationship with the left wing of the USPD in 1920. In 1921 it merged with two other unions into the Union of Manual and Intellectual Workers, which was closely aligned with the KPD. In 1924, the Union of Manual and Intellectual Workers was dissolved on the KPD’s urging and its members transferred into the ADGB unions. See ‘Die Freie Arbeiterunion Gelsenkirchen’, *Der Kommunistische Gewerkschäfter*, no. 3/1921, and Weber 1969a, primarily pp. 68f., 98f., and 168.

58 Heinrich Malzahn and Richard Müller’s July 18, 1921 letter to Lenin, in *Materialien über die Entstehung der RGO*, SAPMO-BArch, RY 23/45.

groups and left unions in Germany, declining to recommend a single group as an ally. He wanted to learn more and announced that he would present the letter to Bukharin and Zinoviev.⁵⁹ The caution, even evasiveness of this response notwithstanding, Lenin's intervention appears to have had an effect. Müller later recalled that 'Two days later the Heckert/Losowsky congressional resolution had disappeared. Lenin had prohibited the establishment of new unions for Germany'.⁶⁰

The issue of separate organisations for the expelled unionists did not resurface at the RILU congress. The conflict over separate left unions, however, remained a source of arguments within the party for years to come. It was only in 1924 that the party gave up support for the small syndicalist and leftist unions and even went so far as to require all party members to work in the ADGB unions under threat of expulsion from the KPD. Yet a complete about-face followed scarcely four years later when the KPD established the Revolutionary Union Opposition (RGO), its own parallel union network, in 1928. It began with organising expelled members and estranged the KPD from the majority of unionised workers. This policy is deemed by many to have been the main obstacle to a united front of Communists and Social Democrats against fascism. Müller's critique appears to have been confirmed in retrospect.⁶¹

After the union issue was provisionally resolved in the Moscow RILU congress, another area of conflict opened up in the German delegation: who would represent the German communist unionists in the executive office of the RILU? Each of the larger nations was entitled to two delegates and they had to be named at least provisionally before the end of the congress. Along with the uncontroversial candidacy of Anton Maier from Stuttgart, Richard Müller and Fritz Heckert also vied for the second seat. In a crucial vote, Müller was elected with 28 votes to 23, a close victory for the opposition.⁶²

But the vote was not the end of the tensions. There was further controversy over how the German office of the new Red International of Labour Unions would operate and how its members would be chosen. Müller was the only one to speak against the appointment of members by the RILU and in favour of election by the rank and file in Germany. This would mean that the

59 Lenin's 20 July 1921 letter to Richard Müller, SAPMO-BArch, RY 23/45.

60 Richard Müller, *Kurze Ergänzungen zu den vorliegenden Protokollen und Briefen*, September 1932, SAPMO-BArch, RY 23/45.

61 Meyer-Lefiné 1982, p. 191. The RGO policy was linked with another far left change in KPD policy which included branding the SPD as 'social-fascist'. At the same time, it aided Stalin's consolidation of power.

62 20 July 1921 meeting of the German delegation, *ibid.* See also Tosstorff 2004, p. 364.

two delegates elected by the German delegation in Moscow were only temporary and permanent delegates would be elected after the congress in Germany. Some read this as a sign that Müller was in a hurry to return to Germany, an impression that was only strengthened by the position he took on another issue. After some confusion it appeared that only one of the two German representatives needed to remain in Moscow. At this point, however, Anton Maier's youth and inexperience became an issue: doubts were expressed about his ability to represent German communist unionists single-handedly. For his part, however, while accepting the responsibility of representing Germany in the RILU, Müller refused to stay in Moscow on the grounds that he had already introduced Maier as the German RILU secretary and a change would be embarrassing.⁶³ This was admittedly not a particularly substantive reason.

Müller's wish to return to Germany sooner rather than later was understandable. Likely, he did not want to be separated from his family. Moreover, he had invested all his political energies and efforts for the prior 15 years in Berlin and its union movement: leaving it all behind could only be a wrenching prospect. Indeed, he had already refused to move to Stuttgart to work as the editor of the *Metallarbeiter-Zeitung* two years before, and Moscow was quite a bit farther afield than Stuttgart. Permanent residency there was barely imaginable.

Now, in a heated and probably fairly confused discussion on these tangled issues, the election of Müller and Maier was itself thrown into doubt. Some participants suspected that pre-conference deals had been made while others rejected such allegations. After extensive debate, they finally agreed on wording worthy of Solomon: 'The delegation has decided that Müller will remain in Moscow for as long as necessary'. This meant that Müller would conduct business in Moscow for a few weeks longer until new delegates could be elected at a national union conference in Germany.⁶⁴ So despite the roiling conflict, the delegation ended its work on a reasonably constructive note. There had been critical votes and interventions, but an outright break had not yet occurred: for the moment, at least, the crisis in the KPD appeared to have been averted.

But the peace did not endure back in Germany. External criticism persisted because Paul Levi was not rehabilitated despite the agreement in Moscow and the support of Clara Zetkin; the harsh tone of his pamphlet and the publication of internal party matters had prevented it. Levi stuck to his critique and

63 20 July 1921 meeting of the German delegation, *ibid*. In a letter dated October 1924, Müller claimed that the KPD prevented him from taking the position. See *Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard* [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343; page 15.

64 22 July 1921 meeting of the German delegation, in: *ibid*.

the party executive to its unreasonable position and – the conflict persisted. The executive had only reluctantly accepted the peace treaty and continually hoped to ‘destroy’ and remove from the party those ‘centrist elements’ that had, in their view, crept into the Communist International – or at least that was Karl Radek’s view.⁶⁵

Even this reluctant acceptance meant, however, that the party was now split into three camps: an emerging left around Ruth Fischer, Arkadi Maslow, and Ernst Thälmann, who clung to the offensive course; the so-called ‘right opposition’ including Malzahn, Clara Zetkin, and Richard Müller; and the central office under the chairmanship of Heinrich Brandler, which formed a middle ground. An informal alliance between the party executive (supported by the Third International) and the ‘right opposition’ founded on the principles of the peace treaty allowed the party to maintain a fragile balance.⁶⁶

As more members of the opposition, including Ernst Däumig, were expelled following the Jena party conference in August 1921, and other members, such as Adolph Hoffmann, resigned, the number of free-floating communists grew and many of them joined Paul Levi in late September 1921 to establish the Communist Working Collective (*Kommunistische Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, or KAG). It was not to be a new party so much as a part of the broader communist movement. Its goal was to push the communist party toward reform so that the two could be reunited.⁶⁷ The existence of this communist opposition group outside the party placed the KPD under additional pressure and deepened internal divisions.

Although his long-time political companion, Ernst Däumig, played a leading role in the KAG, Richard Müller did not align himself with this tendency and remained in the party instead.⁶⁸ Müller did sympathise with the KAG, however. He published two newspaper articles criticising the March Action and the party’s union policies in the *Sowjet* (Soviet), the organ of the communist opposition published by Paul Levi. These articles positioned Müller as a supporter of Levi’s tendency.⁶⁹

65 Karl Rade, ‘Glossen zum Dritten Weltkongress’, *Die Internationale*, 22 September 1921, cited in: Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 386.

66 Ibid., pp. 388–90.

67 Ibid., pp. 409ff.

68 Many publications as far back as Wilhelm Heinz Schröder’s encyclopaedia *Sozialdemokratische Reichstagsabgeordnete und Reichstagskandidaten 1898–1918* (Schröder 1986) note Müller’s collaboration with or membership in the KAG, while Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten states that Richard Müller never joined the KAG. See Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 438.

69 Richard Müller, ‘Gewerkschaften und Revolution’, *Sowjet* no. 2, 1921, pp. 44–8; and Richard Müller, ‘Auf dem Weg zur KAPD’, *Sowjet* no. 3, 1921, pp. 86–90. The official organ

According to Müller, the March Action had set the party back to a point comparable to the aftermath of the failed January uprising of 1919. In particular, he felt that the communists' union work had been ruined by the action. 'The party', he wrote, 'must start its work in the unions anew, which is all the more painful given that communist activities in the unions had been surprisingly successful before the action.'⁷⁰ Such renewal was, however, easier to demand than realise. The communists were isolated in the unions and their right-wing leaders once again had a free hand in their attempt to counter communist influence with further expulsions and repression. This created a 'bleak outlook' for revolutionary struggles to come.

In another article titled *Auf dem Wege zur KAPD* ('The Road to the KAPD', i.e., the Communist Workers' Party of Germany), Müller once again unambiguously warned the KPD not to orient itself to the syndicalist unions as the KAPD had. This tendency, he claimed, was influential in the party and in the Comintern, but it would undermine the communists' influence among the masses. The KPD would 'soon become just a sect' if it were to follow that course. Referring to the recent Third International Congress in Moscow, he warned against reducing the party's crisis to the 'Levi case' or to this or that detail of the failed March Action and emphasised instead that the union question was the central issue. He concluded his explanation with a clear appeal against far-left voluntarism.

If the United Communist Party wants to be the leader of the working class, it cannot throw a dozen slogans out into the world every day. [If it does], eventually no one will pay attention any more. Instead, it has to show that it sincerely and proactively represents the interests of the proletariat, not through coups but through proletarian mass actions. That is the only way that it will gain the trust of the masses and be able to lead revolutionary struggles. Such struggles don't happen just because we want them to but only when the revolutionary will of the masses, built up by communists, triggers the [revolutionary] act.⁷¹

of communist unionism, *Der Kommunistische Gewerkschafter*, did not at all reflect on the March Action. It had criticised the use of factory police in its 12th edition on 26 March, but it was not published during the March Action. The next issue was published on 9 April and announced the establishment of the *Rote Hilfe* (Red Aid) for the victims of the fighting without further comment on the failure of the actionist course.

⁷⁰ Richard Müller, 'Gewerkschaften und Revolution', *Sowjet* no. 2, 1921.

⁷¹ Richard Müller, 'Auf dem Weg zur KAPD', *Sowjet* no. 3, 1921, pp. 86–90.

Müller's position here was quite clearly a defence of the Open Letter policy formulated by his friend Däumig. At the same time, however, he was defending his own policy of previous years. It was no abstract progress within the unions that had been destroyed by the March Action but Müller's own work, his personal constructive efforts as head of the Communist Union Centre, that lay in ruins. In those years, Müller had become a veritable communist Sisyphus. The works council congress in October 1920 had rendered the entire structure of the Berlin Works Council Centre invalid and, six months later, the March Action had ruined the progress that its successor organisation, the Communist Union Centre, had made. In both cases, it was Müller who suffered as he helplessly watched the razing of what he had built over months or years.

Now, however, Müller was fighting back. His articles were a clear rejection of voluntarism and its abstractly precise slogans, a rejection of that revolutionary impatience for empty, indeed dangerous, revolutionary gestures. In criticising these political forms, which he thought the communist party had left behind long ago, he simultaneously defended his own political model, that of the revolutionary who swam among the masses, exercised leadership and pushed them forward, but never acted against them. Müller's call for an orientation to workers' real-life interests was not only an appeal to the Open Letter of January 1921 but a core element of his political identity as a shop steward. He had wanted to link everyday shop-floor struggles in the factory with the struggle for socialism from the very beginning of his political career.

According to Müller, the principal threat to the communist party was a swing toward an ultra-leftist course. Referring to recent arguments about the unity of the union movement, he predicted that, 'When the decisions of the world congress stand before us as accomplished facts, some comrades will understand – perhaps too late – what they actually meant'.⁷² Although he was criticising the Comintern's influence, his main concern was not the KPD's increasing dependence upon it. While Levi's pamphlet had denounced the Bolsheviks' (alleged) stage-managing of the March Action, neither he nor most of his contemporaries were able to foresee how big such problems would get.

The Revelation Affair

By supporting the KAG in *Sowjet*, Richard Müller also connected the new organisation with the Berlin shop stewards. No independent left network of shop stewards had emerged since the end of the council movement – the

⁷² Richard Müller, 'Auf dem Weg zur KAPD', *Sowjet* no. 3, 1921, pp. 86–90.

remaining members of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards had largely become part of the KPD's works council apparatus or the Communist Union Centre, which worked with communist union representatives in all workplaces. But a new generation of Berlin workplace representatives had been overwhelmingly opposed to the March Action and the Berlin district leadership of the KPD around Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow, champions of the offensive course. There was an attempt to revive the Shop Stewards as an autonomous group on the 1918 model in light of the increasing tendency toward centralisation within the KPD and an inaugural meeting was held with 31 DMV representatives from the KPD and the USPD in Berlin on 19 September 1921. An organising committee was elected. The goal was to force the unified front policy by means of pressure from below.⁷³

To say that the central committee of the KPD was unhappy with this development would be an understatement. On 18 October, a central committee member named Friesland, also known as Ernst Reuter, described the situation as an 'existential threat' to the party. Only a month later Reuter joined the Levi opposition and was expelled from the KPD, only to join the SPD the following year and go on to become the first mayor of West Berlin. He became famous around the world during the Berlin Blockade of 1948 and the Western airlift for his speeches defending Western values against Soviet policy.

But in October 1921, Reuter was still an ardent defender of the KPD party line and particularly afraid of a merger of the Shop Stewards and Paul Levi's moderate-communist KAG because it would threaten the dominance of the party leadership. Party representatives intervened in Shop Stewards' meetings, but they were voted down.⁷⁴ Although the Shop Stewards described the KPD leadership as 'two-faced' and felt that they were being attacked and monitored by the party, they nonetheless remained within communist circles, at first purely out of sympathy for the KAG.⁷⁵ Ultimately, the party's own flustered interventions would provoke the formal break: when Berlin party leader Arkadi Maslow attended a meeting of Shop Stewards on 15 November and demanded their immediate subordination to the *Twenty-One Conditions*, the Shop Stewards left the meeting in protest against this communist diktat and announced the resumption of negotiations with other parties, the USPD, SPD, and the KAG, to re-unite working class forces to the extent possible.⁷⁶

73 Koch-Baumgarten 1986, pp. 418f.

74 Ibid.

75 9 November 1921 meeting of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, SAPMO BArch RY I 2/708/120.

76 Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 420.

Richard Müller appears to have participated in this reorganisation of the Shop Stewards only indirectly and his Berlin comrades' break with the KPD did not at first tempt him to follow. It was only when the discussion around the March Action heated up again in late November 1921 with what became known as the Revelation Affair that he took additional measures. In its 25 November edition, *Vorwärts* published internal KPD documents which indicated that the March Action could have been the result not of police provocation but planned beforehand and jointly staged by the KPD and the Third International. If true, this would have implied that the KPD was at best irresponsible and at worst capable of putting workers' lives at risk at the instigation of the Third International. While the relationship between domestic radicalisation and interventions from Moscow is still debated among historians, the revelation was sufficiently serious to prompt the KAG to mount a new offensive and demand both a review of the action and greater independence of the party from the Third International. The intra-party opposition now also made its own demands against the offensive theory and called for the resignation of the people responsible for the March Action and the establishment of an investigatory committee. By Christmas Eve 1921, these demands were endorsed by 128 officials, including Richard Müller and many of the Berlin Shop Stewards, in a public declaration.⁷⁷

The KPD leadership refused to budge, however, opting instead for an even more severe line against the KAG and the intra-party opposition, a stance that Moscow supported. The Bolshevik leadership had initially supported the opposition despite the standoff with Paul Levi but, amid the increasingly tense situation the party in Germany faced, it executed a U-turn and sought to stamp out the opposition and stabilise the party. The executive committee of the Third International, as well as Leon Trotsky personally, sent heated letters to Berlin describing the KAG as 'a group of political quacks' and condemning the Declaration of the 128. The KPD leadership also received a third circular letter from Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, and others expressing their support in the struggle against the KAG.⁷⁸ All these letters were published in the *Rote Fahne*. Moscow's sledgehammer approach did not, however, have its intended effect. Instead, it outraged the opposition even more.

Richard Müller, along with several members of the main office of the communist youth organisation, used the publication of the letters as an opportunity to write to the KPD leadership on 19 January 1922 condemning its methods and expressing solidarity with the KAG. They affirmed that, 'The communist movement is strong enough to correct all its mistakes and weaknesses on its

77 Ibid., p. 427.

78 Ibid., p. 435.

own', and went on to say that, 'Anyone who believes that violent measures are necessary for progress shows just how little confidence he has in the communist movement'. The central office's new policies would 'drive more and more revolutionary workers out of the KPD', including some 'who the broad masses of the proletariat recognise as genuine revolutionaries'.⁷⁹ Faced with a party leadership that was using purges to play power politics with Moscow's support, and was contributing to a split in the movement under the pretext of unity, Richard Müller felt compelled to protest against it directly, despite all the party discipline that he had internalised.

Three days later a whole array of opposition members were expelled from the party. The central office was clearly committed to its new line and the price was a massive weakening of the party and increasing subordination to the Comintern. Historians have generally assumed that Richard Müller was also forced to leave the party in early 1922.⁸⁰ Only the recent discovery of a long personal letter Müller wrote to the Comintern, hitherto buried in the RGASPI archive in Moscow, shows that he remained in the party at least until October 1924.⁸¹ At that point, the KPD tried to expel him, but it is unconfirmed whether the attempt was successful.

Müller, the Unwanted Communist

Why didn't Müller leave the KPD with the other opposition members? After all, the KAG's prospects of functioning as a corrective to the KPD had ended with the expulsions and the KAG would now gravitate toward what remained of

79 19 January 1922 letter to the central committee of the KPD, estate of Paul Levi in the AdS D Bonn, 1/PLAA000273.

80 Tosstorff 2004, p. 392; Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 436. Peter von Oertzen notes that most of the former council activists left the KPD after a few months of activism: von Oertzen 1976, pp. 294f.

81 Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343. This information was difficult to find given that the file contains material about three or possibly four different persons all named Richard Müller who were re-labelled 'Рихард Мюллер' and melted into a single composite personality by later archivists. Among them are two authentic documents by the Richard Müller we are dealing with: a 1921 questionnaire (*ibid.*, p. 20) and correspondence from 1924, including several letters dealing with the attempt to expel Müller from the KPD (pp. 13–18). Other letters deal with a Richard Müller from Bremen and a third from Bavaria who left the country and, in 1928, asked to be admitted into the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA), which then checked his background in Germany. Rumours that Richard Müller migrated to the USA after 1933 might have originated from this correspondence.

the USPD, eventually merging with it. And in October 1922, the remnants of the USPD, with the exception of a small minority around Georg Ledebour, re-joined the SPD, splitting the left of the German political spectrum neatly between the communists and social democrats, leaving no ground between them. Even a man like Levi, chairman of the communist party in 1921, became a social democrat in 1922.

However, in 1921, all this was in the future and things looked rather different to Müller. In his 19 January letter to the party central committee in support of the KAG, he had been very clear that he believed the KAG's movement toward the USPD was a mistake and should be resisted. He could not imagine collaborating with the Independents. They were not sufficiently revolutionary and the influence of moderates who would not or could not think beyond a left social-democratic perspective was too strong. Müller's own conflicts with the USPD executive board since the Kapp Putsch and intense animosity with Robert Dissmann were also a factor. Moreover, he was unable to conceive of a way to work with the head of the KAG, Paul Levi, constructively: they had been unable to find common ground, probably for temperamental reasons. We do know that Müller characterised Levi as:

A man with a universal education, great oratorical talent, a tendency toward dictatorship, and a demonstrative disdain for anything that does not belong in intellectual circles. Changeable in his opinions and resolute, Levi was an outstanding critic who could tear everything down and all too often did. Unfortunately, he lacked the ability to do anything constructive...⁸²

Müller, a metalworker and autodidact, obviously had little inclination to let Levi, a Heidelberg- and Grenoble-educated Doctor of Laws, set the political course. While he enjoyed a close friendship with the equally well-educated Ernst Däumig, Müller's alliance with Levi against the party executive was short-lived and purely tactical in nature. Müller later stated that he was a KAG sympathiser, but within the group he had always resisted the course set by Paul Levi and his followers.⁸³ For both political as well as personal reasons, therefore, neither the USPD nor the KAG were alternatives for Richard Müller.

⁸² Müller 1925, p. 90. In her memoirs, Rosa Meyer-Leviné expressed a similar assessment of Paul Levi. 'His arrogant nature', she wrote, 'his cavalier disregard of everything that was intellectually beneath him scared off a great many people who might have been reliable pillars of the Revolution'. Meyer-Leviné 1982, p. 22.

⁸³ *Begründung der Beschwerde an das Exekutivkomitee der K.I.*, in: Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343; page 15.

Though Müller remained a communist, he was unable to gain any influence within the party after 1921. This is clear from his October 1924 letter to the Executive Committee of the Comintern protesting his expulsion, in part by recounting his political activities and contributions.⁸⁴ The KPD wanted to expel Müller in 1924 and accused him of refusing to do any political work for the party. But according to Müller, all of his work within the party after his opposition to the March Action in 1921 was sabotaged by the party leadership, which also blocked his engagement with the Red International of Labour Unions. It also prevented him from taking up and exercising the position of spokesman for the communist metalworkers in Germany, a post to which he was elected at the 1921 KPD party conference in Jena. Müller therefore resigned from it and worked instead for the board of the Berlin metalworkers' communist caucus.⁸⁵ Even though this new position was only remotely connected to the sort of large-scale party politics he had become involved with since the revolutionary defeats of 1918 and 1919, party headquarters prevented Müller from taking that position, leaving him without an official task.⁸⁶ After all these efforts were stymied, Müller went to work in the Russian foreign trade office in Berlin. This was wage labour to him, far from the activism he had known.

We understand a little more about Müller's career choices and his attitude towards them from some correspondence he had with a German archivist about the sale of his archive many years later. In explaining his need to sell his archive, Müller said that, unlike many Social Democrats, he had refused to 'accept a well-paid government position, although it had been offered to [him].'⁸⁷ We have no way of knowing which 'government position' Müller was alluding to, but we do know that the foreign trade service where he found work was the Soviet trade mission, established in May 1921 at Lindenstrasse 22–5 in Berlin.⁸⁸ It was affiliated with the Soviet embassy and overseen by the Ministry

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ The communist members of the ADGB unions were organised in caucuses within each union. The board that Müller mentions must have been a Berlin subdivision of the communist caucus within the DMV.

⁸⁶ Müller also claimed that articles he wrote for the *Rote Fahne* during that period went directly into the trash and that he was even prohibited from speaking from the audience at public KPD meetings because some 'comrades' forcibly prevented him from doing so. See *Begründung der Beschwerde an das Exekutivkomitee der K.I.*, in: Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343; page 15.

⁸⁷ *Aktennotiz und Berichte Richard Müllers zum Kaufangebot der Protokolle des Vollzugsrates*, SAPMO-BArch, Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte, R 201/46.

⁸⁸ The treaty of 6 February 1921 elevated the delegations for the care of prisoners of war of both the German Reich and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to diplomatic

of Foreign Trade. Its function was to coordinate German-Soviet economic relations.⁸⁹

Richard Müller's remaining connections within the KPD must have secured that position for him. Regine Heubaum's dissertation on Soviet trade policy sheds some light on how a dissident like Müller got such a job: in the early 1920s Soviet trade offices abroad, such as the one where Müller was employed, suffered from a critical lack of qualified employees, leading to a politically lax employment policy. It was only revised later.⁹⁰ While such laxity helped Müller land this job, it was hardly pleasant for him to work in an environment that was increasingly hostile to his independent political trajectory. While in the letter to the archivist quoted above, Müller claimed that he gave up his post at the Russian trade mission 'after [he] had become acquainted with the local operation', in his 1924 letter to the Comintern (as the Third International was now known), he said that he was fired for political reasons.⁹¹

Two years after he lost his position as head of the Communist Union Centre, Müller returned to the political stage for one last time. The hyperinflation of 1923 had caused a major political crisis and the situation was so volatile that the communists were preparing for imminent revolution. Müller could not stand aside and he participated, if only as a 'common soldier', as he put it in

missions and established their respective trade missions. See *Reichsgesetzblatt*, issue 1921 II, p. 929.

- 89 Deprived of overseas markets during the war, trade with Soviet Russia had become increasingly important for Germany. Despite their political aversion firms in heavy industries like steel and iron therefore pushed for good economic relations with Soviet Russia. See Carr 1966, p. 307.
- 90 'The workforce at the local foreign trade offices was to some extent beyond the state's control: In the autumn of 1923, it was impossible to provide details with respect to the professional training or start dates for over 50 persons employed in the trade missions by the Ministry of Foreign Trade. The final report by a committee within the Council of People's Commissars, which inspected several of the Ministry of Foreign Trade's missions abroad in December 1922, particularly criticised the staffing in these foreign trade offices. The report refers to the employees' inadequate political reliability and the small proportion of party members among the workforce'. Heubaum 2001, pp. 18–19.
- 91 *Aktennotiz und Berichte Richard Müllers zum Kaufangebot der Protokolle des Vollzugsrates*, SAPMO-BArch, Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte, R 201/46. The fact that the 1924 verdict on his expulsion was explicitly forwarded to the KPD shop-floor organisation within the Russian Trade Mission might indicate that Müller held that post until that year, but we do not know for sure. It strongly indicates that Müller was forced to leave, as he claimed in his letter to the Comintern: Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343; page 14.

his interesting account of the events. The uprising failed but it did prompt the government to ban the KPD, a ban that cost the party dear.

The account, which amounted to a long indictment of the Communist leadership in Berlin and in Germany, effectively argued that the party leadership was practically criminally responsible for the failed uprising in 1923. It had neglected to prepare for revolutionary struggle and sought to make up for it with careless and irresponsible action and gestures. The account was part of Müller's complaint to the Comintern about his expulsion from the KPD, written in October 1924:

The economic and political conditions in October 1923 created a situation that was revolutionary in the extreme... When victory was within reach of the Communist Party and the German revolutionary proletariat, I considered it my duty to get involved as a common soldier in the party's ranks.

I attended the party assembly in my district to address the political situation and prepare for action. During the discussion, I told the comrades that the party had to fight. I told them that the working masses that were already mobilised had to be led to a powerful general strike... as a precondition for the decisive struggles that would follow, which would necessarily result in a civil war.

The assembly leaders gave no indication that they might be interested in mobilising the working masses. Instead, they worked out a battle plan that was so fantastical, so criminal toward the party and the revolution that I might have thought they were paid police informers if I didn't know them personally as absolutely honest and committed party comrades. They must have just been repeating instructions they had received... elsewhere.

The things that the assembly leadership said amounted to a how-to manual for civil war. They talked about what people who had weapons could and had to do, what had to be done to the police and the military, what the party had already done in the area to prepare and what it would do in the future, etc. And in the end they sought out comrades and put them in charge of all sorts of possible and impossible things.

Obviously it is the duty of a revolutionary party to prepare for civil war during periods of calm. But over 300 people were present at that assembly, having found their way in with no controls. While there were undoubtedly people there who were rightly seen as occasional fellow travellers, there were surely police informers as well. Revealing internal party matters, discussing preparations for militant actions, and selecting

people that the leadership didn't know for the most delicate jobs, all with informers present was beyond foolish, it was criminal.

If the police were extraordinarily successful at uncovering caches of weapons, learning about the inner details of the actions in advance, and making arrests, and if the government, the bourgeoisie, and the Social Democrats were able to take successful preventative measures, it was not because the police were so clever but because the communist leadership was so dumb.

I learned something terrifying at that assembly and it only became more frightening when I heard that the same thing had happened in other districts as well: Any decent fighting posture that the party had had as the party of the revolutionary proletariat had been destroyed by mindless, indeed frivolous, militancy... The party was militarily unprepared and it was trying to make up for that at the last minute, thinking of wrong and careless means and methods that could not remedy what it lacked, and giving itself and its action away to the police.

...

What could I do given the situation in that assembly and in the party and the movement in general? As I had done so many times in the past, I had to bite my tongue and keep quiet. There was no possible way to repair the havoc that had been wreaked, get the movement back on solid ground, and stop its course toward disaster. When everything is collapsing on the party and it has to wear itself out in hopeless struggles against its opponents, self-criticism is just out of place.⁹²

The failed uprising of 1923 was a disaster for the KPD. In most of the country its bid for power was called off shortly before any action began because, contrary to Müller's claim in his Comintern appeal that the situation was 'revolutionary in the extreme', most workers simply refused to join even a general strike. And when, in Hamburg, day-long shoot-outs took place between insurgent Communists and the police, they only led to a nationwide prohibition of the KPD that lasted until spring 1924.⁹³

⁹² *Begründung der Beschwerde an das Exekutivkomitee der K.I.*, October 1924, in Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343; pp. 16–17.

⁹³ The most detailed account of the events of 1923, based on archival sources from both RGASPI-Moscow and the former East German party archives (now SAPMO-Bundesarchiv), is Harald Jentsch's study *Die KPD und der 'Deutsche Oktober' 1923*; see Jentsch 2005.

Under this ban, the KPD lost half of its members and it became increasingly difficult to maintain even the most basic party structures. A desperate party leadership now turned to Richard Müller in its hour of need and, in November 1923, party headquarters offered him a position: leader of the KPD's agitation in the unions and works councils. Müller refused, though his reasons and motivations were, to say the least, complex. On the one hand, he said he refused because the failed action had practically ruined the party:

The consequences [of the failed action in October 1923] were the decline of the party, the wrath of the police, the triumph of the bourgeoisie, and an offer of a position to me by the district chairman. I turned that position down.

Why?

The party had been infiltrated by informers from top to bottom. I did not know three fourths of the officials I would have been working with and I certainly could not assume that they were not informers themselves. The party was like a house that had been set on fire by its own occupants. It was impossible to put the fire out and anyone who tried would burn along with it. It seemed a better idea to let the house and all of its garbage burn out and rebuild it with solid walls that no fire could destroy, with new and better material.⁹⁴

However, just a few lines down Müller said that he had turned down this offer because the party had failed to agree to certain of his conditions.

On November 23 I wrote a letter declaring myself ready [to accept the position] if the works councils and not just the party leadership agreed that I be given an advisory vote in the Berlin district leadership and if the party were to draw up a clear programme of action and organisation for the works council movement and work out the movement's relationship to the party and the unions. So I raised questions about issues that were, at the time, unclear.⁹⁵

Even at this late stage, Müller was willing to work for the party and the broader working-class cause provided the KPD was willing to accept his conditions.

94 *Begründung der Beschwerde an das Exekutivkomitee der K.I.*, October 1924, in: Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343; p. 17.

95 Ibid., p. 18.

His demand for a coherent approach to the works councils and the unions in general was certainly in character, as was his stance: however eager Müller may have been to resume his work with the backing of the party, he did not adopt the tone of a rank-and-file party member but of a leader of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards. But this was not his position any more, and the KPD did not accept demands from Müller. It declined Müller's conditions in a one-line letter telling him that the KPD was not willing to negotiate with someone suffering from 'delusions of grandeur'.⁹⁶

This was a harsh answer to someone who had built up the party's union structures in Berlin, but it had a core of truth. Probably even Richard Müller did not realise that his past efforts, his credibility, and his organisational skills were not enough to regain influence within the labour movement such as it now was. Events and his own journey through them had ensured that by 1923, he did not represent any substantial group of workers. If he wanted to demand a change in the KPD's policy, he would have needed to build an oppositional power base as he had done during the Great War. Whether this was possible in the conditions that now prevailed, was, of course, another question.

Müller did not test those possibilities. Instead of practical politics he had begun to devote his time to the entirely different field of historical analysis. He had been working on a book about the German Revolution since at least April 1923.⁹⁷ Only his self-perception as a revolutionary fighter had prevented him from leaving politics voluntarily. This also might be the reason why, despite all his disappointments, Müller desperately wanted to remain a member of the KPD. His lengthy account to the Comintern was written for the sole purpose of protesting against his expulsion. He seems to have been successful with this: according to a short note in his file in Moscow, he was re-admitted into the German party.⁹⁸ But there is no trace of Müller being active as a Communist ever again – neither as a leader nor as a 'common soldier' of the party. In 1930, articles in the *Rote Fahne* stated that Müller had re-joined the SPD. This is totally unconfirmed. The articles do confirm, however, that certainly by this time, he was no longer a communist party member.⁹⁹ After 1924, Richard Müller left traces only as historian, not as protagonist of history.

96 Ibid.

97 'Leichen-Müller als Historiker', *Vorwärts*, no. 159, 5 April 1923.

98 Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343; p. 11.

99 'Leichen-Müller als Hausbesitzer', *Rote Fahne*, April 17, 1930; 'Mieterschutz gibt's bei Müller nicht', *Rote Fahne* April 18, 1930; 'Eine Niederlage Leichen-Müllers', published on May 25, 1930.

Richard Müller as Historian of the German Revolution: 1923–25

Like many other protagonists of the German Revolution, Müller later wrote about the events. However, most of the others wrote as memoirists, Müller wrote as a historian. His record would have a lasting impact: apart from Emil Barth, Müller was also the only one to write from the Stewards' perspective and his accuracy, as he changed roles from protagonist to historian, far exceeded that of Barth.

This chapter will both reconstruct how Müller turned historian and explain the historiographical approach of his three volumes, published in 1924 and 1925. These books, which ended up being three volumes of a single work with the title *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik* (From Empire to Republic), were the first systematic reflection on the German Revolution from a Marxist perspective. They became a standard source on the events, although their interpretations were often ignored by later historians because of their Marxist provenance. While the following pages will deal with the new role of Müller as historian, his reception in later historiography will be the focus of the next chapter.

After he had lost his position as head of the Communist Union Centre in 1921, Müller appears to have been dormant for quite some time. Finally *Vorwärts* reported in April 1923 that the 'nearly forgotten' Richard Müller was going to publish a book on the German Revolution¹ and revealed that he had kept the Executive Council's only remaining records in his private collection. That he certainly had. And more: whether because he was interested in keeping records for their own sake early on or because he wished to keep ammunition for future political offensives or defences or, indeed, because he had an early inkling of his future vocation as a historian who wanted to 'properly assess the past', beginning with the onset of the Revolution, Müller had assiduously collected and archived documents.² His historical works derive much of their value because he possessed an extensive archive of leaflets, minutes of meetings, appeals, and other documents of the German Revolution, some of which were reproduced in the appendices to his three books. Much of this material, above all the more than 3,000 pages of Executive Council meeting

¹ 'Leichen-Müller als Historiker', *Vorwärts*, no. 159, 5 April 1923.

² Müller 1924b, p. 8.

notes, would have been permanently lost to historical research had Müller not saved his private copy of the minutes.³

With the news of Müller's possession of the only remaining copy of the Executive Council records, the SPD, which saw itself as the lawful owner of those documents, demanded, in another *Vorwärts* article, that the Executive Council records be returned, referring to agreements dating from 1918 that had awarded copies to the USPD and the SPD.⁴

In his response to *Vorwärts*, Richard Müller confirmed that the agreements had established that neither party could publish the materials without the consent of the other. But, he clarified, the records in his possession were his private copies, not the ones assigned to the parties. Those had been destroyed by Gustav Noske in August 1919 when he violently broke up the Executive Council. The Social Democrats had, therefore, 'no moral right' to the records. Moreover,

If, back then, some comrades had managed to safeguard the most important documents from Noske's destructive rage, they would have rendered valuable service to history. Why did Noske want to destroy all the Executive Council's files? Why are you concerned about their continued existence? Are you afraid of history's judgment?⁵

³ According to a list compiled by Richard Müller in 1923, the archive contained the following materials:

I: 102 stenographic transcripts of meetings of the Executive Council of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils from 11 November 1918 to August 1919 comprising 1,847 typed folio pages with 109 appendices;

II: 23 stenographic transcripts of meetings of the general assembly of the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils from November 1918 to August 1919 comprising 842 typed folio pages with 49 appendices;

III: 7 stenographic transcripts of local workers' council assemblies comprising 157 pages and 19 appendices;

IV: 37 Executive Council orders, decisions, and resolutions published through public notice between 10 and 16 November 1918.

The list did not include leaflets and other documents unrelated to the proceedings of the Executive Council, although the documentary appendices of his books show that Müller collected those documents too. See Richard Müller's 19 September 1923 letter to the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), SAPMO-BArch, RY 5/ I 6/3/117, Bl. 45. Special thanks to Prof. Gerhard Engel for providing me with this document.

⁴ 'Die Protokolle des Vollzugsrats', *Vorwärts*, no. 161, 7 April 1923.

⁵ Letter from Richard Müller dated 9 April 1923, in *Aktentheft und Berichte Richard Müllers zum Kaufangebot der Protokolle des Vollzugsrates*, SAPMO-BArch, Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte, R 201/46.

Vorwärts opted not to pursue the matter further, confining itself to publishing a brief sneering piece asking Müller to consider whether history had not already passed judgment on him.⁶ There was simply no way to force Müller to return the documents. He was therefore able to continue working undisturbed and in the autumn of 1924 his first book, *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik* (From the Kaiserreich to the Republic), appeared.

By then, Müller had already begun writing another book under the title *65 Tage deutsche Räterepublik* (65 Days of the German Council Republic).⁷ This title was dropped somewhere along the line and the book was released the following year as the second volume of the earlier work with the subtitle *Die Novemberrevolution* (The November Revolution).⁸ The final volume, entitled *Der Bürgerkrieg in Deutschland* (Civil War in Germany) would appear the following year.

The first volume dealt with the war years before the outbreak of the November Revolution, covering the *Burgfrieden*, the anti-war opposition in the unions of Berlin, the metalworkers' mass strikes and eventually the formation of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards. It ended on the evening of 8 November 1918, just hours before the Revolution entered Berlin. The second volume took up the drama that began to unfold the following day in considerable detail – for instance, the events of the first day alone, narrated as always from the standpoint of the Shop Stewards, took up the first 50 pages. The next 170 or so

6 'Das Urteil der Geschichte', in *Vorwärts*, no. 163, 12 April 1923.

7 The working title of the first volume was also different from the printed edition. In October 1924, Müller wrote, 'I have been busy with a study of the revolutionary movement in Germany during the World War and after the Revolution. The first product of this study is already complete and ready for printing with the title *The World War as Midwife to the Proletarian Revolution*. The second part, *65 Days of the German Council Republic*, has also been started while the third, *The Civil War in Germany*, has been put off until a later date. (The first two books will appear with the title *From the Kaiserreich to the Republic*.)' Letter from Richard Müller to the Executive Committee of the Comintern, in: Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343, p. 13.

8 Shortly after the first volume was published, Müller was called as a witness in a trial that German President Friedrich Ebert had started against a journalist who had called him a traitor because of Ebert's role in the strike of January 1918. Defending himself, Ebert declared that he had only joined the strike leadership to end the strike as soon as possible. Müller also spoke on the strike, which led to a rather absurd exchange between Müller and Ebert's attorney, Heine. In court, Heine accused Müller of using his testimony as an advertisement for his book. Müller, however, pointed out that he had only made passing reference to the book when talking to Heine. It is unclear whether or not the dispute promoted the book's sales. See Brammer 1925, pp. 38–43.

pages focused mainly on the council movement in November and December 1918, especially the rise and fall of the Executive Council and its failure to confront Friedrich Ebert and his Council of People's Deputies which had effectively become the government. The volume ended with an assessment of the first National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils on 16 December 1918. Each of the first two volumes included an appendix with reproductions of documents from Müller's archive, especially revolutionary flyers, leaflets and announcements. These, and the very detailed accounts contained in the two works, amounted to the most in-depth discussion of the revolutionary events published at the time. In 1925, Müller added a third volume dealing with the events of the year 1919, especially the March strikes, the short-lived council republics in Bremen, Munich and Braunschweig – all of them workers' attempts to establish council socialism in their respective cities. The volume, effectively dealing with the failure of the revolution, was called *Der Bürgerkrieg in Deutschland* (Civil War in Germany), stressing the military violence used to repress both mass strikes and council movements.

Müller's Historiographical Approach

In his books, Müller reconsidered the Revolution as a historic moment of self-liberation by the working class, one in which the working class had to 'purchase awareness of its historical calling at a high price', as Müller put it in the preface of the first volume. He did not see himself as writing a definitive history of the Revolution so much as making a contribution to the revolutionary movement's self-consciousness and further progress. That was why Müller tried to gain his party's approval for this work. He was to be disappointed. Instead of supporting Müller's historical writing, in February 1924 the party charged him with neglecting active work for the KPD to focus on his writing. Müller defended himself by pointing out that it was the party that had rejected his work since 1921 by not allowing him to occupy any position in the union activities of the KPD and that writing the first history of the German Revolution from a Marxist point of view was an important political activity in its own right:

In studying recent upheavals, I have become convinced that it is a great defect of our contemporary movements to pay no attention to this period and its tumultuous events; that we commit the same errors as before because we do not have time for self-criticism. No wonder we have a glut of new fighters who cannot relate to earlier events and for whom the

historical development of the revolutionary movement in Germany is a closed book.

Moreover, it is a greater evil that the recent past has been the subject of numerous books, or rather the object of misrepresentation, by a great many bourgeois people. Until now there has been no depiction of the past, and particularly of the revolutionary movement, from a communist perspective. I have made it my responsibility to combat this evil.⁹

This failed to move the KPD's internal tribunal: without having read the book (it was not published at that point and there is no evidence of the tribunal's access to the manuscript), it declared that Müller's history of the German Revolution was simply 'private business' because the party had not officially commissioned him to write it. Such a commission would, of course, have been unlikely, to say the least. The KPD was not open to the type of self-criticism that Müller was engaged in. Instead, they expelled him two days later, on 9 February 1924.

Müller, as we know, furiously protested his expulsion in a letter to the Comintern in October 1924. But he did not allow the KPD to stop his work nor to influence his writing. In his new role as a historian, he followed his own course, much as he had during his time as a political activist.

In the preface to the first book, Müller criticised elitist historiography that tended 'to view the revolutionary movement... only as the result of specific and purposeful action on the part of individual leaders or a few political groups'. Among other things, this form of historiography led to the *Dolchstosslegende*, the 'stab-in-the-back myth', promoted by monarchist circles, in which the revolution emerged as little more than a conspiratorial stab in the back of the homeland just when the German army was close to winning the war in 1918. Müller wanted to dispatch this myth and all other sorts of historical fallacy concocted by 'people who have every reason to hide their own guilt from the nation and from history'. In doing so, he singled out his former comrade Emil Barth, for '[taking] great delight' in exploiting such fallacies in his work *Aus der Werkstatt der deutschen Revolution*. It was, according to Müller, 'nothing more than a vain, exhibitionist showpiece'. In Barth's version, he and the Shop Stewards were more or less sole authors of the Revolution. Barth tended to fashion himself as secret leader of a revolutionary conspiracy that orchestrated

⁹ Letter from Richard Müller to the KPD arbitration tribunal, 7 February 1924, in Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343, p. 13.

the German Revolution, which was a perfect fit for the mind-set of the extreme right. Though they usually fingered the Spartacists or the Jews as the conspirators, not the Shop Stewards, Barth did give them an account of the Revolution as a conspiracy of a few rather than as a social movement of the masses.

In place of such personality-centred and conspiratorial historiography, Müller offered a history in which the ‘social, political, military, and psychological effects of the World War’¹⁰ constituted the all-important backdrop. He consciously sought to follow the example of Karl Marx’s perspective on history and the state as developed in the *Communist Manifesto* and *The Class Struggles in France*.¹¹ It is worth noting that Müller, who had previously always been a pure pragmatist in his writings and speeches and only rarely cited Marx anywhere, prefaced his first book with a separate chapter on ‘Ideas of Proletarian Revolution’. In this small but valuable historical-theoretical survey, he emphasised the continuity between bourgeois and proletarian, and democratic and socialist, revolutions, thereby locating the German Revolution within the wide arc of German, and European, history. Looked at this way, the November Revolution was the continuation of the failed revolution of 1848, though with different dramatis personae: where the latter had failed to topple the monarchy, the former, made by the working classes, completed that bourgeois task. However, unlike Russia’s October Revolution, which had followed the democratic revolution of February 1917 to establish socialism, though prematurely, Germany’s November Revolution had failed in that further task.

Müller probably first grappled with Marxist theory and history extensively in 1922 and 1923.¹² Unlike other leaders of the German working class like Liebknecht, Luxemburg, or Hilferding, who were highly educated, often with advanced degrees, Müller, who did not even go to high school, had learned his socialist theory only as he needed it for practical purposes in the little free time he had between working and engaging with the union. By then, he had read more of Frederick Taylor and writings on industrial management than he had of Marx. But Müller possessed a solid political instinct for the big picture

¹⁰ See the preface to the first volume, Müller 1924a, pp. 45–7.

¹¹ Marx and Engels 1976, Marx 1978. The reference to the *Class Struggles in France* might have been a mistake of Müller’s. He clearly intended to refer to Marx’s description of the Paris Commune, which is not in that work but in *The Civil War in France* (Marx 1986 [1871]). The mistake is understandable given the similarity of the titles and the fact that even the German originals of Marx and Engels’ work were still quite fragmentary and published in different versions in the 1920s.

¹² The essay ‘Die Entstehung des Rätegedankens’ (Origins of the Council Idea), in which Müller also addresses Marxist historical theory, should perhaps be read as a precursor to these historical works: see Müller 1921b.

and complex connections, which allowed him to synthesise his own experiences with sophisticated theoretical and historiographical frameworks that he studied after his retreat from active politics. This meant, for example, that he refrained from oversimplified charges of betrayal in his description of the unions' war policies, explaining them instead as consequences of a general tendency toward bureaucratisation, arising from the constant increase in the unions' member rolls, the resulting growth of their administrative structures, and above all from the nature of the unions' extensive internal support and welfare systems that, in many ways, resembled insurance and mutual help organisations rather than revolutionary ones. Their 'cash box mentality', ultimately a product of the unions' own success, had made them inert, incapable of waging class struggle.¹³ In Müller's writings, historical explanations and even ironies replaced simplistic moralism.

This approach established Müller's claim to the title of historian. Unlike Emil Barth, Gustav Noske, or later writers on the Revolution like Philipp Scheidemann and Hermann Müller-Franken, Richard Müller deliberately avoided writing a memoir in the anecdotal style, preferring to give a systematic historical analysis of the Revolution and its failure from the distinctive point of view of the working class in general and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards in particular. Thanks to his extensive archiving over the years, he was able to support it with numerous original sources. Though he was himself a central protagonist of the events he narrated, in an almost polar contrast to the memoirists, he referred to himself rarely and then in the third person and generally aimed for an objective rendering.

Of course, Müller was not neutral and like other protagonists in their writings he also justified his own historical role. Notable omissions occur, for example, in his description of the resistance to the *Burgfrieden* from 1914–16, where he obscured the fact that the Shop Stewards in their first year did not oppose the war as such, while his description of the Executive Council does not question his failed policy of seeking agreements with the Social Democrats even in retrospect. Müller defended his own policies and those of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards; partisanship on the side of the revolutionary working class was a matter of course for him in any case. But on the other hand it was precisely

¹³ These explanations are an extension of Müller's 1920 criticism of unions in which he was explicitly opposed to 'the [policies] of the union leaders, not to them as people' and above all criticised their ideological fixation on social reforms within a parliamentary context. See Müller 1924a, pp. 72–7 and Richard Müller, 'Die Tagesfragen der Gewerkschaftsbewegung', *Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 45/46, 1920.

because of his partisanship, his commitment to the working class to which he belonged, that he made an effort to meet scholarly standards.

In addition to their detailed annotations, the books include appendices with numerous original sources in the form of appeals, leaflets, and records, many of which were published there for the first time. Those materials not only supported Müller's positions but also allowed readers to develop their own image of the events he was describing. Above all, this scholarly approach distinguished Müller's work from the memoir literature mentioned above, most of which did without references altogether and were created predominantly from memory. To date, his three books are standard texts that are cited as sources in any serious interpretation of the German Revolution. However, they were all too often used merely as sources for facts. Their rich interpretations and conclusions were ignored because they question the certainties of historians in both East and West Germany.¹⁴

The first two works were published by Wieland Herzfelde's Malik publishing company. The cover images were created by renowned artist John Heartfield, the publisher's brother. Heartfield, who had adopted an English pseudonym as a form of protest against German wartime nationalism, was a painter and graphic designer. He is considered the inventor of political photomontage and was a co-founder of the Dada movement. Heartfield's works revolutionised graphic art and his satirical collages remain unrivalled today.¹⁵

Müller's works clearly received considerable care and attention from his publishers. The Herzfeldes were sympathetic to communism but were financially independent of the KPD, despite occasional liquidity crises, and were in no way subject to party discipline. For that reason, they were able to publish works by dissidents like Müller as well as partisan publications such as the magazine *Sowjet-Rußland im Bild* (Soviet Russia in Pictures). Indeed, the Malik publishing catalogue read like a who's who of the political and artistic avant-garde of the time. Alongside historical-political works by Karl August Wittfogel, Leon Trotsky, and Grigory Zinoviev, Malik also published lyric poetry by Vladimir Mayakovsky, prose by Upton Sinclair, Maxim Gorky, and Ilya Ehrenburg, as well as drawings by George Grosz.¹⁶ The Malik publishing company, founded in 1916, survived censorship, inflation, and the lack of purchasing power among proletarian readers to become a significant player in the book market of the Weimar Republic in the 1920s. Through extensive publicity across the entire German-speaking world as well as publication of titles in

¹⁴ On the historiography and impact of Müller's writings, see chapter 10 and 11 of this study.

¹⁵ Unfortunately, images of the original Heartfield covers have proved unobtainable so far.

¹⁶ A list of all titles published by Malik is available in Hermann 1989.

different formats at different price points, the company was able to reach the educated strata as well as the proletarian public. As a result, it had a far wider distribution than the KPD's own publishing house.¹⁷

Despite this impressive record, Müller was not satisfied with his publisher. In a conversation with archivist Karl Demeter at Germany's national archives in June 1925, he expressed his wish to publish the planned third volume himself because the publishing companies in Germany would do nothing for his work due to his differences with the KPD.¹⁸ Was Müller under the misapprehension that Malik was dependent upon the KPD? What was it that was lacking, according to Müller, in the care and attention Malik was giving to his works? Was there another reason for this breach between author and publisher?¹⁹ We do not know.

Müller was talking to the archivist Demeter because he was planning to sell the Executive Committee's records in his possession to an archive after he completed his first two books. He had initially contemplated selling the materials to the Soviet Union, but decided against it 'upon realising that the Russians would only make entirely tendentious use of them'.²⁰ In order to ensure that the materials could be used for 'indisputably scholarly purposes', he decided therefore to sell them to the German national archive, then based in Potsdam. The Executive Council's minutes, which would have been lost without Müller's initiative, survived in the archive. Today the originals are available for scholars in the *Bundesarchiv* in Berlin, while a printed edition was published in three volumes between 1993 and 2002.²¹

¹⁷ See Stucki-Volz 1993, pp. 188–90, *passim*.

¹⁸ Report by archivist Karl Demeter dated 22 June on a visit by Müller on 19 June 1925, SAPMO-BArch, Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte, R 201/46. It is possible that Müller erroneously assumed that Malik was directly linked to and dependent upon the KPD, a mistake that others also made because of the publishing company's unambiguous tendency. Malik was, in fact, both financially and politically independent of the KPD although the party did repeatedly attempt to directly interfere with Herzfeld's business affairs. See Stucki-Volz 1993, pp. 177ff.

¹⁹ Unfortunately, no written exchange between Müller and Herzfelde has survived in the Wieland Herzfelde archive at der Akademie der Künste (Academy of the Arts), Berlin. According to the archive, a portion of the author's correspondence was seized by the Gestapo in the 1930s and has been considered missing since then.

²⁰ 22 June report by archivist Karl Demeter on a 19 June 1925 visit by Müller, SAPMO-BArch, Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte, R 201/46. Müller had indeed offered his archive to the Comintern in a letter dated 19 September 1923. See SAPMO-BArch, RY 5/ I 6/3/117, Bl. 45. Thanks to Prof. Gerhard Engel for providing me with this document.

²¹ See Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, 1997 and 2002.

Despite his negative experiences with party communism and his reluctance to entrust his historical archive to Soviet institutions, Müller always remained an admirer of Lenin. In the preface to his first book, published in 1925, he referred explicitly to the theoretical achievements of the revolutionary, who had died in January that year. Müller had evidently come to terms with Lenin's acceptance of the KPD leadership depriving him, Malzahn and the members of the opposition of their party positions after initially intervening on their behalf in July 1921.²² He reserved his disdain for the heads of the KPD and the current Soviet leadership, both of which he had steered clear of in the interim.²³

Müller as Publisher

This distance, and presumably the political insecurity it generated, was probably another reason why Müller planned to establish his own publishing company. In talking to Demeter, Müller had certainly spoken of wanting to safeguard his authorial independence 'from all sides'.

But starting a publishing house required money. Müller had not mentioned a possible sale price for the Executive Council's records to Demeter but when the latter offered him 2,000 Reichsmarks, Müller 'explained, laughing and justifiably referring to the documents' significant value as source material, that it would be impossible: he would not take anything less than 15,000 Reichsmarks for them'. He also hinted that he had already been offered three times as much by someone in Moscow. The hint may have just been a sly negotiating tactic and the fact that Müller only made the sale after the hyperinflation of 1923 had ended and the Reichsmark had stabilised indicates a certain business sense.

His skilful negotiation was ultimately successful. After appropriate internal consultations, the Reichsarchiv accepted the proposed price. Internal correspondence shows that the archive accelerated its approval of the purchase and wanted to acquire the documents 'at all costs'. At that time, in fact, Soviet government envoys were already in Germany and, by the archive's own information, wanted 'to buy up all source materials referring to the Revolution for the Russian archive or for the Soviet government's scholarly institutions'.²⁴ As

²² On Lenin's approval of KPD policy in 1921, see Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 435.

²³ In April 1924, *Vorwärts* proclaimed that Müller had spoken at an election meeting in Osnabrück where he endorsed a speaker with nationalist views. Müller not only issued a denial but also expressly noted that he 'will not speak in this year's campaign'. *Vorwärts*, no. 162, 11 April 1924.

²⁴ Reichsarchiv correspondence on the Müller papers, in SAPMO-BArch, Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte, R 201/46.

a result, the contract was sealed quickly and that July the approximately 3,000 folio pages were transferred from Richard Müller's house on Werderstrasse. He was able to reserve the right to continue to examine the records unhindered for future research.²⁵

According to its preface, the manuscript for Müller's third book was completed in May 1925, that is: before the sale. Upon receiving 15,000 Reichsmarks, Müller was now in a position to publish the work himself through the publishing company Phöbus-Verlag, which he co-founded with his old comrades Paul Eckert and Heinrich Malzahn, both of them Revolutionary Shop Stewards from the days of the Great War.²⁶ According to the 1927 *Reichs-Adressbuch*, a business directory not unlike the 'yellow pages' telephone directories of later times, all three were also active as booksellers: Phöbus-Verlag ran a bookstore on Brandenburgstrasse (Lobeckstrasse today) in Berlin's Kreuzberg neighbourhood.²⁷

Phoebus or Phoibos was an epithet of the Greek god Apollo and of his mark as leader of the muses and defender of the arts. The choice of that name was certainly an expression of Müller's new self-conception as a writer and journalist. But Apollo was also a god of revenge. During the Trojan War, he inflicted a plague on the Greek camp as a form of vengeance for their capture of one of his priests. The content of Müller's third book corresponded to such dark motifs.

²⁵ The negotiations are also described in Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, pp. xlvi ff.

²⁶ A 'Phöbus Verlag, Eckert und Malzahn G.m.b.H.' first appears in the 1926 Berlin business register, with its establishment listed as 1925. Richard Müller was the chairman. Berlin business register, section 2, 1926. See the *Handelsregister* in the online resources of the Landesarchiv Berlin.

The name Phöbus-Verlag was first used in 1922 for several brochures authored by Alexander Losowsky and others dealing with the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU). They were published jointly by the RILU and a Phöbus-Verlag, which may have been a forerunner to Richard Müller's publishing company. See Alexander Losowsky: *Das Aktionsprogramm der Roten Gewerkschafts-Internationale*, Verlag der Roten Gewerkschaftsinternationale/Phöbus-Verlag, 1922; Alexander Losowsky and Heinrich Brandler, *Der Kampf der Kommunisten in den Gewerkschaften: Berichte zur Gewerkschaftsfrage auf der Konferenz der erweiterten Exekutive der Kommunist Internationale vom 24. Febr. bis 4. März 1922*, Verlag der Roten Gewerkschafts-Internationale Berlin sw. 11, Königgrätzerstr. 109/Phöbus-Verlag, 1922. The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek also lists several other brochures published in the same way.

²⁷ According to the *Deutsches Reichs Adreßbuch für Industrie, Gewerbe, Handel, Landwirtschaft*, Verlag Rudolf Mosse, 1927, vol. V, the bookstore was at Brandenburgstrasse 26 (p. 42). On the renaming as Lobeckstrasse, see the online register of contemporary and historical street names in Berlin compiled by the website luise-berlin.de: <<http://www.luise-berlin.de/strassen/Bezo6h/B823.htm>> (accessed on September 12, 2013).

Civil War in Germany – on the Failure of a Revolution

It was titled *Der Bürgerkrieg in Deutschland* (The Civil War in Germany) and told of the suppression of the January uprising, the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, as well as the end of the Bavarian Council Republic – in sum, the final defeat of the Revolution, which Müller portrayed as the result of an undeclared civil war. He had already depicted it as such in an article published in late 1920 and, much later, Sebastian Haffner would adopt the idea in his well-known work *Die verratene Revolution* (The Revolution Betrayed, available in English with the title *Failure of a Revolution: Germany 1918–1919*).²⁸

The civil war framework was not only useful for morally condemning the crimes of Noske and the Freikorps, it also proved its worth in permitting the frank depiction of the working class's unpreparedness for a decisive struggle for power. By 1920, Müller had already claimed that the proletariat should 'finally understand that it must fight the bourgeoisie with the same weapons with which the bourgeoisie fights the proletariat'.²⁹ But only a portion of the proletariat had ever been prepared to fight an armed struggle. Most of the workers were tired of war and disliked violence. They could not or would not counter the repeated attacks by the Freikorps and the counterrevolution with equal force. The proletariat resorted to arms only when matters came to a head and only in local and isolated instances, including overly hasty actions like the January uprising. The civil war motif also made sense of the role of the repeated bloody conflicts and excessive violence on the part of the Freikorps and government troops in the revolution.

If the proletariat was unable to strike back in a coordinated way on a national level, that was, according to Müller, because it lacked 'a political party with a clear programme, revolutionary experience', and the will to power, the latter being an allusion to the USPD's indecision.³⁰ Lenin and the Bolsheviks, who had been independently organised in Russia long before their own Revolution, served as part of Müller's model of an ideal revolution from which he could criticise and historically comprehend the tragic course of the November Revolution, but only a part. In Müller's mind, admiration for Lenin sat alongside open criticism of the purges and the limitation of internal party debate that he had expressed in his own letter of January 1922. Leninist discipline and decisiveness had to be combined with the Shop Stewards' closeness to the rank and file and direct democracy to yield Müller's political ideal. His conception

²⁸ The book, first published in 1969, is marketed today under the title *Die deutsche Revolution 1918/1919*. On the idea of a German civil war in 1919, see Haffner 2004, pp. 183–97.

²⁹ 'Tagesfragen zur Gewerkschaftsfrage', *Arbeiter-Rat*, no. 45/46, 1920.

³⁰ Müller 1925, p. 205.

was therefore very close to the political line of Rosa Luxemburg, whom Müller praised as ‘the clearest and boldest mind’ of the Revolution and whose theory of revolution he had approvingly referred to in his first book.

Müller had met Luxemburg personally in 1916 when she attended a meeting with the Shop Stewards after the dispute with Liebknecht. They were unable to work closely together at that time, however, due to Georg Ledebour’s opposition. Luxemburg was arrested shortly thereafter and Müller was conscripted into the military. Though Luxemburg was freed when the Revolution freed all political prisoners, she and Müller failed to collaborate again at the KPD’s founding convention in late 1918 – not because of any differences between them but because of the Shop Stewards’ mistrust for the party conference deputies. Müller considered Luxemburg’s death a great loss for the revolutionary ranks.³¹ In a KPD under her leadership, Müller probably could have worked actively for more than just a few months.

The failure of the ill-judged January uprising by an unprepared working class in 1919, ending with the political murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, is widely assumed to mark the end of the Revolution. Certainly Müller considered the January uprising to have been a key factor in the Revolution’s failure. He believed that it could have driven the Revolution forward if it had been a defensive action. As an offensive one, however, it prompted a coup attempt whose complex politics the masses could not easily understand, was bloodily suppressed, and left Berlin leaderless as a revolutionary focal point and incapable of action for months.³² However, according to Müller the decisive defeat of the Revolution came two months later when growing unrest about the absence of socialisation led to the March strikes which were the last opportunity for a decisive challenge to the national assembly. Only when they were ended by military force, leading to a great many more deaths than in January, could the Revolution be said to have run its course.

The preface to Müller’s third book is also remarkable for its very negative assessment of the political situation in 1925. The election of former Commander-in-Chief Paul von Hindenburg as president was a particular shock to him. He saw the presidency of the monarchist Hindenburg as indicating the victory of the counterrevolution not only over socialism but also over the republican achievements of the German Revolution. ‘Hindenburg as president of black-white-red Germany, nationalist death squads, naked class

³¹ Müller 1924a, p. 104, footnote, pp. 111, 177f. and Müller 1925, p. 206.

³² Ibid.

justice, those are the ripening fruits of the seeds that were lavishly scattered by the fathers of this Republic, that is the disgrace of the Revolution'.³³

Those seeds of violence were the Freikorps, the 'nationalist death squads' that had already fought against the revolutionaries in 1919 with the swastika on their steel helmets.³⁴ They were acting in alliance with the 'fathers of the republic', meaning the Social Democrats, the Catholic Centre Party and liberal delegates, who formed a coalition in the national assembly that drafted the Weimar constitution in 1919. For Müller, it was not a social contract arrived at through peaceful contemplation by wise founding fathers. To him, the constitution was a result of the lethal violence exercised at the same time against the council movement and its dissenting vision of radical democracy. By the autumn of 1924, Müller wrote that the low-point of this disgrace had been reached 'when the triumvirate of Kapp-Lüttwitz-Ludendorff and the politically monolithic union of Stinnes-Ebert, Stinnes-Legien laid the burdens of the World War on the back of the proletariat'.³⁵ Müller was referring to the 1918 pact between capital, personified in the industrialist Hugo Stinnes, and labour, personified in Carl Legien, chairman of the General Commission of Trade Unions, which brought neither democracy nor stability and only allowed the Freikorps and proto-fascist forces to organise against the young republic without fear of resistance from the labour movement. In the preface to his first historical work, written in late 1924, Müller could still speak of the 'coming proletarian revolution'. Such hopes had disappeared by 1925 when Müller published his third book. He already saw the beginning of the end of the Weimar Republic in the unpunished actions of the nationalist forces, whose terror was protected by the state – even high-ranking liberal and catholic politicians like Walter Rathenau or Mathias Erzberger had been murdered by assassins

33 Black, white and red were the colours of the German Imperial flag before 1918, commonly used by various right-wing political forces in the Weimar Republic and still used by Neonazis today. The passages on political murder and class justice undoubtedly refer to Emil Julius Gumbel's 1922 book *Vier Jahre politischer Mord* (Four Years of Political Murder), which uses statistics to demonstrate that right-wing political murderers were granted quasi-impunity given that similar acts on the left were always punished severely. It was reprinted and massively promoted by Malik-Verlag in 1924 along with a response from the national Ministry of Justice (which more or less confirmed the charges). Müller 1924a, p. 5; Gumbel 1924.

34 'Hakenkreuz am Stahlhelm' (Swastika on the steel helmet) was the first line of the Freikorps' Ehrhardt Brigade's fight song; other Freikorps also wore the swastika as a sign of nationalist conviction. The Nazi-Party (NSDAP) founded in 1920 also had roots in the Freikorps.

35 Müller 1924b, p. 7.

affiliated with Freikorps-groups in 1922 and 1921. Confronted with this degree of political terror, Müller no longer spoke of the historical duty of the proletariat, of those 'higher goals of humanity' to which he had dedicated the opening chapter of his first book the year before. A darker, previously non-existent pessimism now permeated his thinking.

Footnotes and Suppression – Richard Müller’s Impact on Historiography

The influence of Richard Müller’s books and his interpretation of the German Revolution on later generations have varied over the decades, depending on how it was filtered through the historic contestations that succeeded each other in German politics. This chapter will examine how Müller’s books were read both in the Weimar Republic and later in East and West Germany and how these interpretations became influential internationally as well. While exploring or even summarising decades of Marxist-Leninist and social democratic historiography of the German Revolution produced during Weimar and then in the Cold War era is impossible here, I outline its main features. In doing so, I argue that Müller’s analysis and understanding are critically important for overturning the Cold War narratives that still pervade popular and historical discourse.¹

The Millstones of Social Democracy and Marxism-Leninism

The impact of Richard Müller’s history of the German Revolution was paradoxical. While Müller’s politically distinctive historical works on the German Revolution ensured that he would not be forgotten by those with special interest in the German Revolution, the very politics of his interpretation have marginalised Müller and his writings in the consciousness of a broader audience. Already during the Weimar Republic German political discourse had been set in a mould with only a relatively small niche for Müller’s interpretations:

¹ I say ‘outlining’ because any proper history of reception would have to be a comprehensive history of the German Revolution and the German labour movement and would have to be undertaken as a separate and enormous undertaking in its own right. Such completeness is therefore not attempted here. Individual works I refer to should be taken to illustrate a strand of the discourse as *pars pro toto*. For further bibliographical details and research, see among others Mario Kessler’s ‘Die Novemberrevolution und ihre Räte – Die DDR-Debatten des Jahres 1958 und die internationale Forschung’, Kessler 2008b; Tenfelde 1991; Weißbecker 1999; Winkler 2002; Niess 2012. On the overarching controversies in German labour history, see Dowe 1981; Tenfelde and Ritter 1981.

already then, they challenged liberal and social democratic historiography as well as orthodox Marxist historiography.

For liberals and social democrats among his contemporaries, Müller's writings fell under the rubric of 'Bolshevism', a category into which all tendencies to the left of the SPD were summarily placed. Such wholesale lumping was programmatic for the liberal and Social Democratic memoir literature of the Weimar era, which shared an undifferentiated anticomunism and patriotism with the conservatives as well as the antidemocratic right. For all these currents, revolutionary anti-war resistance could only be considered traitorous to the fatherland. When, in giving a statement during a lawsuit in Magdeburg in 1924, President Friedrich Ebert explicitly distanced himself from the January strike's pacifist demands, he simply was true to type. Such views, voiced regularly and from high places, furthered the stigmatisation of the strike, and more generally the anti-war and revolutionary events of the time, as a national betrayal. As the definitive representation and acknowledgment of the mass anti-war strikes, Müller's writings therefore ran afoul of the pervasive restorationist zeitgeist and were branded extremist.

This did not, however, make Müller's works welcome in the communist party. Though the party was not invested in the patriotic consensus, Müller's historiography undermined the nascent mythology around Liebknecht, making it difficult to construct a heroic party history. Müller's complaint that Malik-Verlag did little for his books due to his lack of party affiliation was not rooted in anything the publishing company did or neglected to do but in the broad communist counterculture and media which ignored Müller's works because they did not fit into this emerging historical perspective.

The *Illustrierte Geschichte der Deutschen Revolution* (Illustrated History of the German Revolution), published in 1929, offers a representative instance of this party communist view of the German Revolution.² Compiled by a collective of KPD writers, the collection was a milestone in Marxist historical studies. It included extensive documentary and illustrative material that provided the first detailed depiction of the entire war and revolutionary periods up to and including the Kapp Putsch. With recourse to Marxist theory, it offered an equally sober and terrifying accounting of the World War which discussed things left out of the dominant revanchist interpretation of the war, such as its economic causes and wartime profiteering. Illustrations on every page and reproductions of contemporary source materials heightened the

² The *Illustrierte Geschichte der deutschen Revolution* was published without author credits in *Internationaler Arbeiter Verlag* 1929.

book's impact. To this day, the book remains a unique source for images of the German Revolution.³

Though not an official KPD publication, the volume's various omissions and limitations make its origins clear. The central role attributed to the Spartacus League in the anti-war resistance, for example, is clearly excessive and the party's relative weakness in comparison with the moderate USPD is explained away as being solely the result of intensified repression.⁴ The Shop Stewards do not make their first appearance until the January strike and are depicted essentially as creatures of the Spartacists. Their leading role in the Revolution in Berlin is only revealed unintentionally – and ironically in a quote from Karl Liebknecht.⁵ Moreover, according to the *Illustrierte Geschichte*, the establishment of the KPD was the most important outcome of the German Revolution, an idea that would be further refined by later Marxist-Leninist historians who considered the establishment of the KPD to be the only real outcome of the German Revolution.⁶ In fact, by the authors' own admission, only 'the framework of a party' existed in early 1919, one which was far from a strictly disciplined cadre party.⁷ And the revolutionary gains included women's suffrage, the establishment of Works Councils and the eight-hour day, none of which were of inconsiderable interest to the working class.

Essential aspects of Müller's account, for instance about the Shop Stewards' structure and mode of operation, union resistance, and the conflicts within the opposition, were ignored in the *Illustrierte Geschichte*. In it, the radical

3 The only works that can compare are Diethard Kerbs's *Revolution und Fotografie – Berlin 1918/19*, Kerbs's 1989 and Hortzschansky 1978. The only known portrait photo of Richard Müller (reproduced in the first pages of this study) can be found in Günter Hortzschansky's work. Diethard Kerbs' edition, on the other hand, includes only one blurry photo of Richard Müller, but discussed Müller's interpretations thoroughly and even gave a brief biography of him; better shots appear in two other collections edited by Kerbs: Diethard Kerbs (ed.), *Gebrüder Haeckel – Die Revolution in Berlin, November Dezember 1918*, Edition Phototek XXIV, Berlin 1989, p. 19, and Diethard Kerbs (ed.), *Novemberrevolution Berlin 1918/1919 in Zeitgenössischen Photo-Postkarten*, Edition Phototek IV, Berlin 1983, illustration, no. 25.

4 Internationaler Arbeiter-Verlag 1929, p. 202.

5 It is taken from an entry in Liebknecht's diary and addresses the Shop Stewards' hesitancy in early November 1918. Despite his annoyance with the Shop Stewards, Liebknecht never considered the Spartacus League as having acted alone – a clear indication of the Shop Stewards' leading role in preparing the Revolution in Berlin. See Internationaler Arbeiter-Verlag 1929, p. 203.

6 On the differences and continuities between the *Illustrierte Geschichte* and the paradigms of the later Marxist-Leninist historiography, see Kinner 1982, pp. 261ff.

7 Internationaler Arbeiter-Verlag 1929, p. 267.

opposition was effectively reduced to the Spartacus League. While the Spartacists' publication of a leaflet in connection with the April strike was mentioned, for example, the Shop Stewards' preparatory work was not.⁸ The book's bias toward party history stands out for the period following 9 November as well; it did not take the autonomous and non-partisan claim of the council movement seriously and disregarded the Executive Council and the struggle over the works councils. Two dichotomies characterise this portrayal: on one hand, the separation between party and masses and, on the other, between bourgeois or left-opportunist forces and committed revolutionaries within the party. In the opinion of the authorial collective, only the forerunners to the KPD such as the Spartacist League and maybe the Bremen Left-Wing Radicals qualified for acknowledgement among the latter.

Despite its numerous strengths, therefore, the *Illustrierte Geschichte* became a pillar of a polarising and distorted view of history that would characterise German-language historiography of the German Revolution for decades to come. Its Marxist-Leninist perspective, restricted by the party line, formed one pole in this constellation; liberal and Social Democratic historiography formed the other. Both had their eye on their favoured party history; both were striving for legitimacy, though with very different intentions. Of course, due to the lack of overt censorship in postwar West Germany there was greater leeway for diversity of opinion within the mainstream liberal-social democratic historiography, while its communist counterpart in East Germany tended to be quite monolithic. In addition, Marxists and left socialists in West Germany produced a quite extensive historiography constituting a counter-current. These critical voices were influential, but could not break the overall polarisation of historiography.

The reason why this polarisation endured for so long was its embodiment in the state form through the partitioning of Germany after 1945. The historiographical approach focused on parties that the *Illustrierte Geschichte* exemplified was essentially adopted and in some aspects narrowed even further by the East German state (the German Democratic Republic – GDR). In West Germany, on the other hand, a narrative that was teleologically oriented to West German-style parliamentarism dominated, having absorbed the Social Democratic discourse of the Weimar Republic. Alternative conceptions of socialism, such as Richard Müller's, had no place in a historiographical field staked out by the constructed opposition of democracy and communism.

⁸ Internationaler Arbeiter-Verlag 1929, p. 154. On updates to this version see Scheel 1957, pp. 1–140, in particular pp. 22–4.

But there were certainly alternatives. The communist turned left-Social Democratic Reichstag representative and historian, Arthur Rosenberg, wrote two standard works: *Entstehung der deutschen Republik* (translated into English as *Imperial Germany: The Birth of the German Republic, 1871–1918*), published in 1928, and *Geschichte der deutschen Republik* (A History of the German Republic, 1918–1930), a sequel published in exile in 1935.⁹ While these independent Marxist analyses of the German Revolution and its consequences also placed political parties and, above all, events within the Reichstag in the foreground, they also recognised, for example, the Revolutionary Shop Stewards as an autonomous force and drew on important aspects from Müller's histories to paint a sober portrait of the tensions between the Spartacists and the Shop Stewards.¹⁰ Ossip K. Flechtheim also offered his own interpretation in *Die KPD in der Weimarer Republik* (The KPD in the Weimar Republic), written in exile and published in Offenbach in 1948. Referring to Rosa Luxemburg as well as Richard Müller, he emphasised the presence of radical democratic ideas in both the founding generation of the KPD and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards. For him, the grave-digger of Weimar democracy was not Bolshevism or totalitarianism, still rather abstract forces at that time, but the very concrete antidemocratic right of the counterrevolution.¹¹ But these exiled voices could not break through. Despite their popularity, historiography remained captive to the patterns of the Cold War in both German states.

Müller in East Germany

In East Germany, analysis of the past had the additional burden of the Stalinist legacy. The 'Short Course', Stalin's own history of the Bolsheviks, set the terms for German history as well. It includes a digression about the German Revolution that says, *inter alia*: 'True, the revolution in Germany was not a Socialist but a bourgeois revolution, and the Soviets were an obedient tool of the bourgeois parliament, for they were dominated by the Social-Democrats, who were compromisers of the type of the Russian Mensheviks. This in fact explains the weakness of the German Revolution'.¹² Stalin's denial that the German Revolution was socialist and his dismissal of the councils as counterrevolutionary were derived from schematic contrasts with events in Russia

⁹ See Rosenberg 1991a and Rosenberg 1991b.

¹⁰ See, for example, Rosenberg 1991a, pp. 181ff. and Rosenberg 1991b, pp. 52ff.

¹¹ Flechtheim 1948.

¹² Stalin 1939, p. 231.

and became dogma. Although they were qualified over the course of Marxist-Leninist historical scholarship, they could never be entirely overcome.¹³

Despite its dogmatic status, Stalin's view of the German Revolution was eventually contested after an intensive debate arose in 1957–8.¹⁴ It was rooted less in the Revolution's impending fortieth anniversary than in Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' at the CPSU's Twentieth Party Congress the previous year, which ushered in the de-stalinisation of Eastern Europe.¹⁵ Among the voices that now emerged to emphasise the socialist nature of the Revolution was that of historian Albert Schreiner, who had collaborated on the *Illustrierte Geschichte* in 1929 but now emphasised the Revolutionary Shop Stewards' opposition to the *Burgfrieden*.¹⁶ He claimed that the Shop Stewards and their influence within the councils were evidence of the German Revolution's socialist goals.¹⁷ Schreiner instigated the publication of a commendable collection of eyewitness accounts by former Shop Stewards, thereby preserving a large quantity of source materials that would have otherwise been irretrievably lost.¹⁸

Schreiner and his followers only wanted to excise the Stalinist influence from Marxist-Leninist historical studies without challenging the framework established by the *Illustrierte Geschichte*. Events showed, however, that even this was going too far. In June 1958, First Secretary of the East German Socialist Unity Party Walter Ulbricht intervened personally and forced an end to the

¹³ On the problem of comparing the revolutions in (not only) East German historical scholarship, see Ruge 1999.

¹⁴ On this debate, see Mario Kessler's historiographical essay, 'Die Novemberrevolution und ihre Räte – Die DDR-Debatten des Jahres 1958 und die internationale Forschung', Kessler 2008b.

¹⁵ Although its content was published in Western newspapers long before, the speech was only published in the GDR in 1990 as *Die Geheimrede Chruschtschows – Über den Personenkult und seine Folgen*, Chruschtschow 1990.

¹⁶ Robert Leibbrand, for example, described the German Revolution as a socialist revolution that did not achieve its goal. Roland Bauer also emphasised that even in Lenin's writings there were 'no passages that could be seriously interpreted that way, that is whether the German Revolution of 1918 would have needed to pass through a bourgeois democratic stage first'. See Leibbrand 1957, pp. 107f., Bauer 1957.

¹⁷ Schreiner and Schmidt 1957. On Albert Schreiner's biography, see Kessler 2008a.

¹⁸ Among them were many of the oral history files this study relies on. For the published material see the extensive collection in Arbeitskreis verdienter Gewerkschaftsveteranen beim Bundesvorstand des FDGB 1960; and a smaller selection of witness memories in Bezirksleitung der SED Groß-Berlin 1957; Schmidt and Loesdau, 1960; Schmidt 1958; Petzold 1958. The oral history files that formed the basis of these publications, most of them unpublished, are currently in the Bundesarchiv Berlin (BArch SAPMO, SG Y 30) and the Landesarchiv Berlin (LArch Berlin, C Rep 902-02-04).

debate. His *Theses on the German Revolution* reaffirmed the dogma of the bourgeois character of the revolution, although he granted that it had been 'conducted, to a certain extent, with proletarian means and methods'.¹⁹ Ulbricht had no interest in overly extensive de-stalinisation, whether in the context of historical scholarship or anywhere else; it would have threatened his power.²⁰

Ulbricht's intervention came as a surprise to historians, but they had to toe the line if they wanted to publish further on the topic. The journal *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* (ZfG), Journal of History, which was authoritative in the GDR, published a special issue for the first and only time in its history in which Walter Nimz's essay 'Über den Charakter der Novemberrevolution' (On the Character of the German Revolution) essentially confirmed Ulbricht's new thesis²¹ as did the *Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, an eight-volume collection compiled under Ulbricht's leadership that was published in 1966.²² It remained a standard text within the GDR until that state collapsed. Although works which effectively revised these views were published in the following decades, they were rather cautious and did not openly criticise the party line.²³

Some of the more important contributions were made in Erwin Winkler's dissertation on the Revolutionary Shop Stewards in 1964 and Ingo Materna's ground-breaking study of the Berlin Executive Council.²⁴ Winkler intensively engages with Richard Müller's writings, both his union pamphlets and his historical writings. However, Winkler's appreciation of Müller is tempered with criticism. His chronological framework is oriented to the October Revolution

19 Walter Ulbricht, 'Über den Charakter der Novemberrevolution. Rede in der Kommission zur Vorbereitung der Thesen über die Novemberrevolution', *Neues Deutschland*, June 18, 1958.

20 Klaus Kinner speaks of 'preserving Stalinism in the robes of post-Stalinism'. See Kinner 1999a, p. 15.

21 Nimz 1958.

22 Ulbricht 1966.

23 Klaus Tenfelde therefore indicated that there had been almost no change in GDR historians' portrayal of the German Revolution: see the introduction of Tenfelde 1991; Werner Bramke contradicts him in his essay 'Zeitgemäße Betrachtungen über eine unzeitgemäße Revolution', Bramke 1999. On the real but subtle changes in GDR historiography, see Mario Kessler 2008b, pp. 28f. For a complete bibliography of the research on the German Revolution that was published in the GDR, see the corresponding chapters in the special editions of the *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*: 'Historische Forschungen in der DDR – Analysen und Berichte', published at ten-year intervals: 1960 (Helmut Kolbe, pp. 325–43), 1970 (Hans-Joachim Fieber, Heinz Wohlgemuth, pp. 508–14), and 1980 (Siegfried Ittershagen, Kurt Wrobel, pp. 230–40).

24 Winkler 1964.

and only extends to 1917, leaving out the January strike and the preparations for 9 November, the greatest achievement of the Shop Stewards' movement. Instead, it foregrounds the years from 1914–16, a period when Müller and his group had adopted an indecisive and often contradictory position. While Winkler deserves credit for revealing critical blind spots in Müller's writings through a detailed depiction of that phase, we should also note that he did not deal with the period after 1917 at all and therefore avoided the most important opportunities to discuss Richard Müller's critical statements about the Spartacists. Therefore, his account is more fundamentally one-sided than Müller's own portrayal of the events. Winkler overstates the Spartacists' influence and downplays that of the Shop Stewards despite the fact that they were the object of his dissertation.

More influential than Winkler's unpublished dissertation was Ingo Materna's 1978 study of the Executive Council.²⁵ Given that in both German states the prior literature on the German Revolution had focused on the Council of People's Deputies, this was the first time that a scholar had attended to the highest-ranking organ of the Revolution and attempted to investigate why it lost its power so quickly.

Materna also fills in important gaps in Müller's portrayal by critically investigating his role as chairman of the Executive Council. He rightly criticises Müller's indecision, reporting how he preferred to shift problems into committees in the interest of cooperation rather than insisting on discussion and clarification of fundamental issues. Consequently, decisions went unmade, paralysing the council. One of the more spectacular instances of such paralysis came during the January uprising of 1919 when Müller was unable to push the Executive Council to take sides or at least negotiate as a neutral body. This meant that the highest council of the German Revolution was debating technicalities while armed workers were fighting monarchist troops just a few blocks away.

While Materna's account accurately pinpoints important weaknesses in Müller's leadership, it neglects his achievements. For Materna, only Spartacist policies embodied a 'determined' approach to the demands of the Revolution.²⁶

²⁵ Materna 1978.

²⁶ Although Materna supported the Marxist-Leninist frame of reference here and elsewhere in his work, he had difficulty getting his work past the censors camouflaged as experts – there was apparently no interest in a reassessment or closer examination of the council movement. In a personal conversation, Materna told me that he was only able to get his book published because a Soviet historian who was less conservative about German debates had issued him a positive letter of recommendation.

Although his study did lead to a reappraisal of the council movement, rescuing it from the ignominy of having been 'counterrevolutionary', the door to a full and unbiased analysis of the failure of the German Revolution remained shut. It was only in the 1990s that, with Materna's cooperation, the Executive Council's minutes were published for the first time in three volumes. And writing the forewords for them allowed him the opportunity to reassess the role of the Executive Council. In these, Materna stuck to his criticism of Müller and the Executive Council's indecisiveness, but no longer considered the Spartacists as the only significant historical actors. Instead, he and his co-authors highlighted the inner dynamics of the council movement while placing them in the context of the economic and political circumstances of the time. These forewords provide striking portrayals that remain the most advanced research on the subject to this day.²⁷

Our short survey of East German literature on the German Revolution shows that even, indeed especially, where the GDR literature had to deal with Müller's perspective, it was prevented from doing so by its formative political biases. Klaus Kinner, who had adopted these blinkered perspectives in GDR historiography as achievements as late as 1982, when he published his standard text on the construction of communist historiography between 1917 and 1933,²⁸ in 1999 self-critically attempted a balanced view of the paradigms of East Germany's historical scholarship: 'Bundling the traditions within the KPD into the Leninists' triumph within "Thälmann's Central Committee" reduced the history of the KPD and of German communism to a caricature. That perspective not only lost sight of the diversity and wealth of the tendencies within German communism but also stigmatised them as perilous deviations'.²⁹ Thälmann and his followers took over the KPD's Central Committee in 1925, thus beginning the KPD's era of Stalinisation. It was under their reign that the *Illustrierte Geschichte* editorial collective composed its interpretation in 1928–9.³⁰ And,

²⁷ Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, 1997 and 2002.

²⁸ Kinner 1982. Due to his focus on the KPD's historiographical policies, Kinner does not address Richard Müller's writings. But struggles over the direction of the party only appear as deviations from a 'Leninist' version of party history in his analysis of internal KPD debates. Kinner's portrayal of the 'debate with Trotskyist and far left elements' particularly shows how interpretive models that arose during the KPD's Stalinisation phase starting in 1924 continued to have a lasting effect on historiography in the DDR: see Kinner 1982, pp. 291–8.

²⁹ Kinner 1999a, p. 15. For Kinner's earlier, positive assessment of the historical image drafted under Thälmann, see Kinner 1982, pp. 191–403.

³⁰ See Weber 1969a; for the preliminary stages of the process starting in 1921, see Koch-Baumgarten 1986.

while Stalin's personality cult would be overcome in the GDR, the cult around Thälmann would remain a decisive obstacle to critical labour movement research.³¹ In addition to Kinner, other East German historians also expressed similarly critical verdicts of historical scholarship in the GDR. These insider accounts provide a detailed view of the real limitations of historical research in the GDR and these difficulties clarify why an unbiased reception of Müller's works was impossible there.³²

Müller in West Germany

The reception of Müller's works in West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany) suffered from the opposite biases. Voices of historians exiled by the Nazis such as Rosenberg and Flechtheim, who were quoted above, were barely heard in West Germany while the anti-communist discourse of the Weimar Republic was on full throttle. Titles like Walter Tormin's *Zwischen Rätediktatur und sozialer Demokratie* (Between Council Dictatorship and Social Democracy) or Karl Dietrich Erdmann's rhetorically titled *Rätestaat oder parlamentarische Demokratie?* (Council State or Parliamentary Democracy?) set the course.³³ Here the council movement did not appear as a radicalisation of democracy but as its opposite. Müller's documentation of the councils' internal dynamics, their independence from Russian-style Bolshevism, and the strong demand from various groups, ranging from the Stewards to the UPSD and left-wing Social Democrats, for a combination of a council system and parliamentarism during the German Revolution went unnoticed. That situation only began to change in West Germany with the de-stalinisation process starting in 1956: the West now needed a new perspective on state socialism and its history. The challenge presented by the student movement starting in the mid-1960s was also important in West Germany's view of its own past.

The first works to breach the Cold War consensus on the council movement did not, however, come from the student movement but from left-wing Social Democrats and unionists. One example is Fritz Opel's 1957 study of the German Metalworkers' Union (DMV) during World War I, a pioneering work that was the first to investigate the relationship between the *Burgfrieden*

³¹ For a critique of Thälmann's policies from a contemporary perspective, see Meyer-Leviné 1982.

³² See detailed memoirs: Klein 2000; Bock 2002; Pätzold 2008. Shorter commentaries can also be found in: Laschitzka 2007, p. 11; Kessler 2008b; Ruge 1999 and Bramke 1999.

³³ Tormin 1954; Erdmann 1959, p. 185.

and the opposition within the DMV and acknowledged the opposition's achievements.³⁴ This was followed in the early 1960s by the standard texts on the council movement by Eberhard Kolb and Peter von Oertzen.³⁵ It was in these works that the constructed opposition of democracy vs. councils was finally given up and the council movement's claims about 'council democracy' were investigated more thoroughly.

While Kolb was more circumspect in his criticism of the SPD leadership during the Revolution and rejected 'speculation' about alternative courses, von Oertzen brought out the tendencies towards *embourgeoisement* that were already at work among the Social Democrats prior to World War I and analysed the council movement as a response to social democracy's failure to adequately represent the working class and its interests during the wartime crisis. Von Oertzen saw the Shop Stewards as the 'representation of the working masses' who had created their own organs because the bureaucratised party had drifted away from them.³⁶ According to him, the SPD and the unions did not view the workers 'as such' as 'subjects capable of acting. In their eyes, only the party and union organisations were capable of acting and, therefore, authorised to act'.³⁷ This critique of the tendency of the SPD and unions toward bureaucratisation shows that von Oertzen did not just consult Müller's empirical accounts for his well-documented work, but also absorbed Müller's interpretations and partially accepted them without giving up a critical analysis of Müller's role in political events. Von Oertzen, himself a Social Democrat who became a member of the SPD's executive board a few years after the book's publication, set new standards of self-criticism in social democratic circles and induced others to engage more intensively with the council movement.

Another West German commentator who took Müller seriously was Sebastian Haffner. His work, *Die verratene Revolution* (literally, The Revolution Betrayed, published in English as *Failure of a Revolution: Germany 1918–1919*), goes on the offensive with a blunt criticism of the SPD's role in defeating the German Revolution and remains one of the most widely read works on the topic to this day.³⁸ Haffner took on Müller's thesis of a civil war and made a wider audience familiar with the existence of the Revolutionary Shop Stewards for the first time. Historical scholarship, however, took little notice of Haffner's

³⁴ Opel 1957.

³⁵ von Oertzen 1976.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 73. On von Oertzen's critique of Kolb, see pp. 21f.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 76.

³⁸ Haffner's *Die Verratene Revolution – Deutschland 1918/19*, was reissued in 1979 with the title *Die Deutsche Revolution*: Haffner 2004.

interpretation. As a non-historian, he had not cited other historians or sources. Considered superficial due to its lack of references and shunned for its uncompromising critique of current interpretations, it was 'not quotable' despite the fact that it is one of the most popular works on the German Revolution.

The council movement was also the subject of larger monographs in the 1980s. Dirk H. Müller rediscovered the unions' democratic assembly traditions as forerunners to the council movement and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards while Volker Arnold compared the different conceptions of council democracy that developed over the course of the German Revolution.³⁹ Both works engaged keenly with Richard Müller's historical and theoretical writings. Starting in 1973, they no longer had to refer to pirated copies of Müller's writings and could instead consult a new edition of the first volume of Müller's three-volume history, which was published in West Berlin. A new annotated edition of all three volumes followed in 1979.⁴⁰

It should be pointed out, however, that such intensive discussion and research on the councils remained only one current in West German historical studies. Though it was a significant one, it remained an opposition to the mainstream represented by historians like Ingeborg Koza who explicitly limited her comparison of Weimar Republic memoirs to the 'state-supporting' parties and only took note of bourgeois and Social Democratic voices.⁴¹ The historiographical mainstream's disinterest in alternatives to, and contemporary struggles over, the Weimar state could scarcely have been made clearer.

Heinrich August Winkler's standard text on the German Revolution, published at roughly the same time as those of Volker Arnold and Dirk H. Müller, is not guilty of such simple omissions.⁴² However, it does reflect the biases of the dominant approach in West German historiography in other ways. Although Winkler's work stands out for its detailed portrayal and thorough research, expressly absorbing both Richard Müller's and Emil Barth's interpretations and not limiting itself to party history, it shares with the older representations the tendency to write the history of the German Revolution from the perspective of its outcome. It is framed by a central question: 'What proactive social changes were both possible and necessary to give the desired parliamentary system a more solid foundation?'⁴³ As 'the Revolution's most important achievement',

³⁹ Dirk. H. Müller 1985a; Arnold 1985; see also Hottmann 1980; Schneider and Kuda 1968.

⁴⁰ Richard Müller, *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik*, Berlin (West) 1979, published by Olle und Wolter, Volume 1 includes a preface written by Frank Dingel.

⁴¹ Koza 1971.

⁴² Winkler 1984.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 11.

that 'desired' parliamentary system became the historical outcome from which he could read history backwards, omitting consideration of all the roads not taken. With eyes fixed on 1933, Weimar's 'stabilisation' was the overriding concern. The outright violence required for this 'stabilisation', which was the Weimer Republic's real congenital defect – and a central theme of Richard Müller's *Bürgerkrieg in Deutschland* – could not be discussed within such a frame of reference, nor could the expansion of democracy into the economic sphere demanded by the council movement. Similar limitations can be found in Eberhard Kolb's writing and in Susanne Miller's authoritative text *Die Bürde der Macht* (The Burden of Power).⁴⁴ What all three works have in common is that they portray the role of both the Shop Stewards and the Spartacists in preparing for the Revolution as marginal and emphasise the Social Democrats as actors.⁴⁵ This required, once again, thinking backwards from the result: while the SPD had indeed managed to place itself in the forefront of the movement during the tumultuous events of 9 November, the Revolution itself was propelled by the Revolutionary Shop Stewards in league with the Spartacists.⁴⁶

Despite (or precisely because of) these limitations, the interpretive framework described here dominated not only West German historiography but, above all, schoolbooks and the politics of memory.⁴⁷ While it did not necessarily excuse the violent excesses of a Gustav Noske, it certainly promoted unquestioning acceptance of the idea that the Social Democrats' way of addressing demands for socialisation and council democracy – which was to refuse them in the interest of social stability – was the only correct one. This perspective fixed the West German state as the only possible end point, not entirely unlike the view of the GDR's historians who likewise presented their state as the fulfilment of history so far. In their way, both traditions were unable or unwilling to engage in a productive discussion of the historical counter-factuals or 'what ifs' Müller's account highlighted. The fact that such engagement did take place in West Germany to some extent, however, is an indication of the fundamentally

44 Miller 1978.

45 For example, Susanne Miller writes, 'The activities of groups like the Revolutionary Shop Stewards, the Spartacists, and the radical left therefore had at most an indirect influence on the outbreak of the Revolution, and that only in a handful of places'. Miller 1978, p. 43. Similarly, see Kolb 1978, pp. 62, 115.

46 On the portrayal of 9 November and its preparations in Eberhard Kolb, Susanne Miller, and Heinrich August Winkler, see Ottokar Luban's detailed critique in Luban 2009.

47 On schoolbook research, see Matthias Steinbach, Andrea Mohring, "Entweder regiert Ebert oder Liebknecht" – Zum Umgang mit der Revolution von 1918/1919 in Schulbuch und Unterricht. Skizze eines deutsch-deutschen Vergleichs', in *Geschichte, Politik und ihre Didaktik*, no. 28, 2000, pp. 184–200.

different degree of freedom in its scholarship, which simply could not be compared with the working conditions of GDR historians given the censorship they had to deal with. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that the discussion around councils in West Germany took place primarily within an oppositional counterculture that occasionally achieved considerable breadth within, for example, the student movement and in labour union and left-wing Social Democratic circles, but never became mainstream. No wonder Frank Dingel noted in his insightful preface to the 1979 reissue of *Vom Kaiserreich zur Republik* that mainstream historical studies in both East and West needed 50 years to catch up with the questions that Richard Müller had raised.⁴⁸ Müller was often cited in both German states for his factual descriptions, but his interpretations were mostly ignored. He inspired a great many footnotes, but hardly any debate.

The downfall of the GDR and German unification in 1989 might be thought to have rendered both old positions obsolete, but no impartial discussion of the council movement or Müller has opened up since then. Instead, both the Marxist-Leninist and West German traditions of historical writing on the labour movement reached their nadirs and disappeared from public awareness. A renaissance in totalitarianism theory and its discourse on the alleged commonality between 'the two German dictatorships' of Nazism and Socialism emerged as a new, institutionally supported master narrative in the united Germany. While comparing dictatorships is encouraged as the major field of research, the far more obvious comparison between the ideals of the socialist movement and the reality of state socialism is a neglected topic of historical research.⁴⁹

So an examination of Richard Müller and his historical works, which not only documents the openness of past socialist blueprints but also demonstrates their unequivocal insistence on emancipation and democracy, is all the more exciting today. There are clear signs that a reassessment of the German Revolution and the council movement has finally begun. Many former East German historians have joined the discussion with critical and self-critical essays, but there are new publications on the subject from other perspectives as well.⁵⁰ Even so, the public discourse on the history of the socialist and communist movement in Germany is dominated by the debate around

⁴⁸ See Frank Dingel, Introduction, in Müller 1924a, p. 42.

⁴⁹ One interesting exception is the work of US historian Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism 1890–1990 – From Popular Protests to Socialist State*: see Weitz 1997.

⁵⁰ For critical texts by East German authors, see among others Kinner 1999c; Plener 2009; Laschitza 2007. Among more recent works and reprints concerning the council

the legacy of the GDR; references to the early socialist critics of party communism such as Richard Müller, Karl Korsch, or Paul Levi are still ignored by the mainstream. This leads to the irony that the narrative of a lineage of 'true' socialism from Marx to the Spartakusbund and the SED, which started in 1925 with the Stalinisation of the KPD, is reproduced and affirmed by modern-day anticommunism.

One can say in concluding this short history of the impact of Richard Müller's writings that it is, on the whole, a history of suppression, but one which the strength of Müller's work has resisted to a considerable degree.

movement, see Kuhn 2012; Böbel and Wentzel 2008. In connection with these, see also Panther 2007, which includes a text by Richard Müller.

Break with Politics, Withdrawal into Private Life: 1925–43

The absence of reliable sources is as much a problem in dealing with the later years of Richard Müller's life as it was for his childhood and youth. When I began my research, there was almost nothing in the literature on Müller's life after 1925. Even the date of his death was unknown. I was able to fill this gap in part and verify the fact that Müller became active in a small, semi-syndicalist union called the Deutscher Industrie-Verband (DIV) before withdrawing into private life and starting a new career in real estate. By 1930, Müller had made quite a fortune as an entrepreneur, leading to accusations and defamation by both former comrades in the KPD and new enemies in the Nazi Party. This chapter is based on what information I was able to piece together though, as the reader will see, large gaps still remain.

The DIV, the 'Construction Issue' and Union Fragmentation

Although Richard Müller established his credentials as a historian and could have used his hoard of documents for further historical work, he did not. The reason why is unclear. Müller gave up not just writing, but his publishing business as well: by 1928, Phöbus-Verlag was no longer a publishing house but was listed in the business register as Phöbus-Treuhand-Baugesellschaft m.b.H., a construction company owned by Müller alone; his partners Eckert and Malzahn had left. We might suppose that neither the publishing company nor the bookstore fared particularly well and therefore had to be abandoned. If so, it may well be that Phöbus-Verlag only ever published one book, Müller's own, *Der Bürgerkrieg in Deutschland*, in its brief history.

Richard Müller probably came to the construction business through his connection with Paul Weyer, an old comrade from the Revolutionary Shop Stewards. Weyer had been expelled from the KPD in September 1924 when he clashed with the party leadership over the union question. He had always supported the position opposite to Müller's and pleaded for the communists to leave the reformist unions. Weyer was initially active in the metalworkers' section of the Union of Manual and Intellectual Workers, a communist union that had developed out of the syndicalist FAU Gelsenkirchen and two

other unions.¹ When the KPD committed to a unified trade-union policy in 1924, it demanded that its members join the Social Democratic unions of the ADGB and forced its own communist union to disband. A number of workers, including Weyer, would not go along with the change. They were expelled from the KPD and organised themselves into left-communist unions. That was when Paul Weyer founded and led the Deutscher Industrie-Verband (German Industrial Association, DIV), established in March 1924. In November 1927, Müller and Weyer transformed the former publishing house into a construction company with a capital infusion of 20,000 Reichsmarks. It was to be an arm of the DIV and build housing for union members, but this institutional relationship became very fraught in time.²

The DIV was one of several ‘revolutionary industrial unions’ which supported an undogmatic Marxism and were active in various industries.³ We know that Richard Müller became involved with the Deutscher Industrie-Verband no later than January 1928 because at the time the *Kampf-Front*, its weekly paper, announced presentations by him on labour legislation and works councils to be given in March that year.⁴ Müller attended the union’s national congress the same year as a representative of its head office and appears to have even led the association alongside Weyer.⁵ However, the dominant figure in the DIV was not Müller but Weyer, who was the union’s national leader. He set the course for the DIV and the direction for the union’s newspaper from Berlin. While Weyer

¹ He was supported by Cläre Casper, at least in the initial phase. See Cläre Derfert-Casper, *Memories*, LArch Berlin, C Rep 902-02-04, no. 1.

² *Die Rote Fahne* reports on a general company meeting on 1 November 1927 in which Weyer and Müller founded Phöbus Construction as a trust company of the DIV with 20,000 RM. Since the company name and commercial register number remained the same, it was in fact a conversion rather than a new establishment. See the article ‘Mieterschutz gibt’s bei Müller nicht’ (No Tenant Protection for Müller), in *Die Rote Fahne* 18 April 1930 and the Berlin commercial register (*Handelsregister*), section 2, 1928.

³ Langels 1989, pp. 41–61 and Weber 1969a, vol. 1, pp. 68ff., 98f., and 168; for Weyer’s biography, see also Weber 1969a, vol. 2, p. 342.

⁴ The presentation was slated for 14 February with a follow-up on 3 March and another on 11 March, 1928. See *Kampf-Front – Proletarische Wochenschrift*, issue no. 1 (4th year), 16 January 1928; no. 7, 27 February 1928; no. 9, March 1929. Unfortunately, I had access to issues of *Kampf-Front* only from the years 1928–9, and not to its entire run, which began in 1924. I must thank Dr. Otto Langels, who first provided me with some copies of the periodical, without which I could not have completed this chapter. While doing research for this English edition I was able to locate all issues from January 1928 to April 1929 in the *Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin*, which included some more information about Müller.

⁵ *Kampf-Front*, no. 48, 17 December 1928, and ‘Leichen-Müller als Häuserbesitzer’ (Müller-the-corpse as Homeowner), *Die Rote Fahne*, 17 April 1930.

wrote the leading articles, Müller was only mentioned as the editorial contact in a few issues in February 1929.⁶

The DIV saw itself as an industrial union as well as a 'fighting union'. Being a 'fighting union' meant, above all, breaking away from the course being taken by the ADGB unions. The DIV criticised them in particular for gradually turning into benefit societies, not unlike private insurance companies which used the strike instrument, conceived as the real proletarian mode of struggle, only in exceptional cases. Being an industrial union meant that the DIV saw itself as a unit of various industrial associations in distinct spheres of production. The traditional principle of a separate union for every profession and trade, still widespread in the Weimar Republic, did not apply. Instead, the DIV was organised under the slogan 'One Workforce, One Industry, One Union', and established a relationship with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the US, which was following the same principle.⁷ Richard Müller, who had always supported the principle of industrial unionism and a revolutionary orientation, had so far opted to push for both of these within existing unions and had been vehemently opposed to establishing new unions.⁸ He must have been forced to soften this view due to the communists' and council activists' persistent failure within traditional unions: in the ten years following 1918, they had not been able to put a single large union on a revolutionary footing for any longer than a few months. Müller had also lost influence in his old union, the DMV, and had even been formally expelled from its ranks by its social democratic leadership simply for engaging with the Red International of Labour Unions.⁹ Like many other unionists who had been expelled for their political activities, Müller had to choose between remaining unaffiliated and joining a smaller organisation. The DIV seemed a good choice, because it was militant not only in its rhetoric but also in practice. But while it was quite successful in works council elections, and led many labour struggles, its efforts to unify the various leftist union

⁶ See *Kampf-Front*, no. 6 and no. 7, February 1929. No contact person was mentioned by name before or after so we do not know whether Müller only worked there briefly or if *Kampf-Front* simply changed the layout of its masthead.

⁷ The IWW sent a note with greetings to the DIV national congress in December 1928, see *Kampf-Front* no. 46, 3 December 1928.

⁸ See Müller and Däumig 1919. The industrial-association principle was also an integral part of Müller's resolution at the DMV congress in October 1919. See Opel 1957, pp. 104f.

⁹ *Begründung der Beschwerde an das Exekutivkomitee der K.I.*, October 1924, in Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343, p. 15.

tendencies met with considerably less success: indeed, another wave of fragmentation started in 1929.¹⁰

Although it had only 20,000 members, the DIV did offer Müller some political purchase:¹¹ it was a Marxist organisation with a theoretical as well as a practical critique of the politics of both the KPD as well as the Soviet Union. As such, the DIV's newspaper *KampfFront* was one of the few papers in the Weimar Republic to criticise the politics of Stalinism from the left. While the bourgeois press as well as *Vorwärts* could not differentiate between the tendencies within 'Bolshevism', the KPD's *Rote Fahne* uncritically supported the Stalinist line and was silent about, or even defended, the persecution of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union. The *KampfFront*, on the other hand, explained the curtailment of union rights and the elimination of councils in the Soviet Union to readers in detail.¹² Its verdict on Trotsky's exile to Siberia in January 1928 is worth quoting: 'By [exiling Trotsky], the "Communist Party" and the "workers' state" of Soviet Russia have finally transformed themselves into a party and a state in which the old revolutionaries are persecuted, transported, and incarcerated as counterrevolutionaries'.¹³

The *KampfFront* saw the Soviet Union as a form of state capitalism in which a bureaucratic caste, led by Stalin, pursued a policy of accumulation at the expense of the proletariat and the farmers.¹⁴ The DIV organ also criticised the tactics of the Comintern, through which Stalin imposed his despotic rule and reduced all non-Russian parties to tools of his foreign policy. Thus, the *KampfFront* was one of the few Marxist voices that criticised the KPD's policies, which were at that time paternalistic, inauthentic, and changed course arbitrarily.

This political orientation made the DIV appealing not only to workers who had been expelled from the KPD but also to critical intellectuals and former KPD officials. Müller, who had fought to stay in the KPD in 1924, must have given up fighting some time before 1928. It seems impossible that he would still have been a member of the stalinised KPD while at the same time being a leading figure in an organisation that sympathised with Trotsky and the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union.

¹⁰ See Langels 1989, and *KampfFront*, no. 16, April 29, 1929.

¹¹ On the number of members, see Langels 1989, p. 44.

¹² See, for instance, the series of articles entitled 'Der Kampf der Opposition und die Lage der russischen Arbeiterklasse', *KampfFront*, nos. 3–10, January to March 1928.

¹³ 'Trotzki auf dem Wege nach Sibirien', *KampfFront*, no. 1, 16 January 1928.

¹⁴ See the paper 'Über die Rußlandfrage' given at the DIV's second national congress, *KampfFront*, no. 47, 10 December 1928.



'Einst und Jetz' - 'Then and Now'

CARICATURE FROM THE JOURNAL 'KAMPF FRONT' ABOUT TROTSKY IN SIBERIA, 1928

Karl Korsch was also active in the DIV after being expelled from the KPD. Korsch was the best known and most theoretically influential of the communist dissidents. His position was close to ideas of council democracy and he had already collaborated with Müller ten years earlier as a guest writer on the *Arbeiter-Rat*, then edited by him and Däumig. In December 1927, Korsch merged his paper *Kommunistische Politik* with the *Kampf-Front* and started publishing articles for the DIV on labour law, collective bargaining law, and other topics.¹⁵

Although Richard Müller was active in the DIV's central office, his exact role is difficult to determine because Weyer was always the organisation's public face. Müller only turned up in the organisation's newspaper sporadically and appears to have been more of a background organiser. He did, however, participate in the DIV's Berlin meetings in 1928 for which he prepared a paper

¹⁵ See Langels 1989, p. 44 and *Kampf-Front*, nos. 8, 13, 15, 17, 1928. Korsch published under his own name or the initials K.K. See also Michael Buckmiller (ed.): *Karl Korsch: Gesamtausgabe Band 5 – Krise des Marxismus*, Amsterdam 1996. Nevertheless, Korsch was not a member of the DIV; on one occasion he even had to leave a members' assembly as a result. See *Kampf-Front* no. 42, 5 November 1928.



Cover of the journal 'Kampf-Front', 30 April 1928.

entitled 'Arbeitskämpfe – Das Tarif und Schlichtungswesen' (Labour Struggles: Pay Scales and the Principles of Arbitration). It was the union's second national congress and met from 2–5 December 1928 in the Berlin Lehrervereinshaus at Alexanderplatz.¹⁶ It was to be an eventful and acrimonious event: rising political tensions in Germany would find their distinctive echo in the DIV and split it.

In his paper, Müller presented a brief history of labour struggles since the end of the nineteenth century and moved on to an analysis of the present. At the time, the system of union-employer cooperation in collaborationist boards, the *Arbeitgemeinschaften*, and state arbitration instituted in 1923 was in crisis. Since 1927 strikes that 'resembled the large labour struggles of the decade before the war' had been intensifying primarily because of an intensified employers' offensive. As Müller pointed out, the capitalists had accepted cooperation with labour unions in the *Arbeitsgemeinschaften* during the Revolution 1918/1919 and state arbitration during the inflation crisis of 1923 only to protect themselves from escalating class struggle. Now the arbitration awards were increasingly being rejected and the companies were reducing wages more and more frequently through mass lockouts. In light of the large profits, particularly in heavy industry, Müller argued that the employers' offensive was not simply a matter of wages but a political offensive aiming to alter the balance of industrial power fundamentally. The companies intended to 'break the organised power of the proletariat in order to clear a path to far worse exploitation and enslavement so that they can achieve the success they yearn for on the global market'.

Müller judged the unions' class collaboration over the previous decade a failure: the employers began rejecting their obligations under it as soon as they felt strong enough and the working class was consequently forced back on the defensive. Under the slogan 'Back to Karl Marx', he urged it to go back on the offensive by broadening its struggle from the economic to the political plane and rejecting the 'ideology of class harmony'. And, speaking on the platform of a small revolutionary union, he nevertheless identified the big unions as the most important actors in this enterprise:

¹⁶ The paper was published in the *Kampf-Front*, no. 1, 7 January 1929 and had been on the agenda for the congress that had originally been called for Pentecost in 1928 (see *Kampf-Front*, no. 11, 26 March 1928). It does not appear in the reports on the congress, however, either because it was postponed due to time constraints or because only the separate print version was possible due to the length of the paper. On the advisory council congress, see no. 16, 29 April 1929.

Just as they were the breeding ground for reformism in the past, so in the future they must be the motor of revolution'. Müller had still not given up hope for a change in the ADGB unions.

Positions such as Müller's were tolerated within the DIV. Though it aimed to convert the greatest possible number of workers to its position, the DIV and other revolutionary unions were well aware of the limits of their influence. In practice the DIV led many strikes in conjunction with Social Democratic unions. Not only did they have little choice, they could also hope that they would be able to push the bigger unions toward a more revolutionary course.¹⁷ Müller's analysis of the state of class relations also illuminated the incipient crisis of the Weimar Republic rather astutely. After a stabilising phase between 1924 and 1929, the crisis was marked by increasingly vicious social struggles. The employers' attacks on the collaboration and state arbitration system were a clear precursor to Chancellor Heinrich Brüning's emergency government of 1930. It dictated a one-sided austerity policy in favour of capital, abusing Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution that allowed the President to issue decrees without consulting parliament in case of emergency. Only a democratic and socialist offensive by the big unions of the sort Müller envisaged could have prevented the transition from the emergency government to the Nazi dictatorship. Unfortunately, it failed to materialise.

Apart from Müller's political speech, the Berlin congress of the DIV in December 1928 also included a pleasant reception for envoys from partner unions abroad. Among the guests was Müller's son Arno, who was also active in the DIV. At the reception, he distinguished himself by entertaining the international gathering with songs and humorous anecdotes. Arno Müller was no mere entertainer, however. He was the secretary of the national office and began working in the Berlin district in May 1929 as the industrial group representative for 'miscellaneous affairs'.¹⁸

But the congress was not only about general statements and entertainment: it brought political controversy as well. This included the so-called 'construction issue' and the congress appointed a committee to review and report back before the congress ended. It was, in fact, a conflict and concerned Phöbus-Bau GmbH, the company run by Weyer and Müller to construct residences for union members. What we know from the scanty record of this matter is that Weyer downplayed it in his business report, saying only that there had

¹⁷ Langels 1989, p. 48.

¹⁸ *Kampf-Front*, no. 47, December 10, 1928, as well as reports on the advisory Berlin council conference in nos. 17 and 18, 6 and 13 May 1929.

been complications in a small district, and that the harsh debates that the DIV's opponents had predicted would arise over the issue did not materialise at the Berlin congress. However, 'because at its core, this matter will impact on the welfare of the association's homeless members', there had apparently been debates prior to the congress. The kind of mixture of business with revolutionary politics that Müller's Phöbus-Bau company appeared to stand for seemed inappropriate to the union's members, who remembered the Social Democratic unions' bureaucratic welfare and insurance institutions all too well. The DIV had strictly rejected these practices. The committee eventually reported back. Only one unanimously passed resolution on the matter is noted in the sole record of the congress that survives: 'The national congress considers the construction of housing for homeless DIV members to be necessary. But it is expressly resolved that the union as such has nothing to do with the Phoebus company'.¹⁹ Being an interested party in the dispute as well as the person in charge of the newspaper, Weyer released only the most minimal information about the affair. He obviously did not want to provide ammunition to the DIV's numerous opponents, but the issue was undoubtedly an embarrassment for him and Müller.

The links between Phöbus-Bau and the DIV were now severed. Richard Müller provided notarised documentation at a DIV advisory council conference in April 1929 to the effect that the union's money did not go to Phöbus either directly or indirectly.²⁰ The name of the firm was also changed to reflect the fact that it was no longer an arm of the DIV: the term '*Treuhand*', implying a trust relationship between the DIV and the company was removed and the company became a private business that was now apparently run by Müller alone.²¹

Apart from the 'construction issue', other disputes arose at the advisory council conference in April 1929, disputes that were to fatally weaken the union: conflicts over its dwindling finances, proposals from the Saxony district for Paul Weyer's expulsion in light of unspecified charges. The resulting debates were, Weyer claimed, 'carried out in a tone that offended the dignity [of the union]'.

¹⁹ 'Verhandlungen des 2. ordentlichen Reichskongresses des Deutschen Industrie-Verbandes', *Kampf-Front*, nos. 47 and 48, 10 and 17 December 1928.

²⁰ *Kampf-Front*, no. 16, 29 April 1929.

²¹ The business address was now Müller's private residence at Werderstrasse 31. See the 1929 commercial register entry as well as the 1930 'national address book' of the publishing company Verlag Rudolf Mosse. The firm's continuity through all of the name changes can be seen in the same commercial register number (no. 37081), Berlin commercial register, section 2, 1926 to 1931, Online resources in the Landesarchiv Berlin.

At a meeting of the DIV leadership on 3 May 1929 the conflict escalated. Weyer accused several officials from Saxony of having started a thriving private company selling commercial ads in the *Kampf-Front* while neglecting their work for the union. In view of the possibility of concrete charges being raised against him, he also alleged that the said officials from Saxony were only seeking to challenge the union leadership and dividing the union because it wanted to stop their underhand behaviour, their attempts to secure their businesses and their posts as paid officials. If the dispute around corruption in the Saxony district of the DIV were not enough, various factions also accused each other of negotiating with the German Metalworkers Union (DMV) about integrating the DIV into the ADGB behind the backs of the other DIV members. Karl Korsch, for example, chastised Richard Müller and Paul Weyer of 'converting to reformism', for which Paul Weyer wanted to take him to court for libel.²² The tensions could no longer be reconciled and the union split.

The circle around Weyer did manage to assert leadership over one part and kept the name 'DIV' and access to all the organisation's working materials. The *Kampf-Front*, then still under Weyer's editorship, declared over-optimistically that the schism had had a cleansing effect on the association and that no tears should be shed for the people who had left. Richard Müller had sided with Weyer when the split unfolded.²³

Contrary to Weyer's optimism, the DIV was never able to recover from the crisis. Its membership dropped and entire locals joined other industrial organisations.²⁴ Weyer and Müller had not only failed to achieve their goal of consolidating and uniting the various revolutionary industrial unions with the weakened remainder of the DIV, its leadership now shifted to Mannheim. Moreover, the various left-wing unions continued to split even further.

The very existence of the left-communist unions was threatened when the KPD began developing its own *Revolutionäre Gewerkschafts-Opposition* (Revolutionary Union Opposition, RGO) groups within the existing reformist unions of the ADGB. The groups were formed in 1928 and had effectively turned

²² See *Kampf-Front*, no. 17, 6 May 1929. Weyer challenged his adversaries to initiate a libel action to clear up the matter in court. DMV representative Urich was compelled to report who he had been negotiating with truthfully and under oath. Korsch's attack on Richard Müller may have been a misunderstanding given that the person originally accused of secretly negotiating with the DMV was Franz Müller, a representative of the DIV's Berlin district. Urich later confirmed that negotiations had taken place. *Kampf-Front*, nos. 17 and 18, May 1929.

²³ See *Kampf-Front* no. 18, 13 May 1929. Müller is mentioned as having taken part in a discussion on 3 May that addressed the future of the union. This is the last trace of Müller's participation in the DIV.

²⁴ Langels 1989, p. 44.

into parallel unions outside the ADGB by 1929.²⁵ The RGO initiated targeted and often successful attempts to create schisms in order to eliminate all other radical leftist unions because it considered them unnecessary competition. It was a policy that weakened left-wing unionism at just the historical moment when coordinated action by left Marxist unions was most necessary. That kind of power might have been able to force the Social Democratic unions toward a more offensive position in order to jointly resist both the increasing attacks from businesses as well as the growing fascist movement. But the RGO, with its conception of the 'social-fascist' nature of the ADGB, was not in a position to do that and its denunciations drove the Social Democratic unions even further into the bourgeois camp.²⁶

Müller as Landlord

Richard Müller must have left the DIV shortly after the split in spring 1929. The discrepancy between what he had wanted for the unions (which he described in his paper on labour struggles at the Berlin DIV congress) and the sad reality of the disintegrating DIV structures must certainly have frustrated him; perhaps they also drove him to the despairing realisation that his political ideals were completely destroyed. It is possible that the construction affair contributed to the split in the DIV given that the Weyer-edited *Kampf-Front* was largely silent about the conflict. The KPD paper, the *Rote Fahne*, even reported that Müller re-joined the SPD a year after the split in the DIV, though it remains unconfirmed.²⁷ He appears to have been focused mainly on Phöbus-Bau around 1930 and the left press had a few unpleasant details to reveal about it and him that year.

Two articles in the *Rote Fahne* dated 17 and 18 April 1930 reported that Richard Müller, as president of Phöbus-Bau, owned 25 buildings with about 300 residences in Berlin's Pankow neighbourhood. The buildings, it claimed, had been erected in late 1929 and had a market value of 1.75 million Reichsmarks. Supported by letters from tenants, the paper reported further that Müller not only demanded that residents pay exorbitant rent and an 'information fee' of

²⁵ More recent studies have shown that these efforts were not orchestrated solely from the outside but in fact grew out of long-standing discontent with ADGB policy, see Heinz 2010.

²⁶ Most of the revolutionary unions sharply rejected social fascism and called for a unified-front policy against fascism. Langels 1989, pp. 49–61. After 1933 many members of the RGO unions were active in the resistance. See Stefan Heinz 2010.

²⁷ 'Leichen-Müller als Hausbesitzer', *Rote Fahne*, 17 April 1930. Paul Weyer is also said to have rejoined the SPD in the late 1920s. See Weber 1969a, vol. 2, p. 342.

60 Reichsmarks for each query on available housing, but also that they grant an interest-free loan of 500 Reichsmarks upon moving in. That was an enormous amount at the time, the equivalent to five months' rent for the sort of dwellings in question.

According to these reports, Müller's dubious rental practices also benefitted from subsidies from Berlin's municipal public housing trust in the form of low-interest loans to construction companies and cooperatives which were funded by a special tax on homeowners and landlords (*Hauszinssteuer*). Such loans were meant to make affordable housing more widely available. According to the reports in the *Rote Fahne*, though, as a recipient of subsidies, Müller was prohibited by public trust rules from taking 'tenant loans', through friendly contact with the trust he had gained approval to convert the loans he had taken into damage deposits. While these were legal in principle, according to German law a damage deposit may not exceed three month's rent. Müller therefore did not give a full refund but kept 300 Reichsmarks from every tenant as a damage deposit. The papers also claimed that Müller would not recognise the tenants' committee that the residents had elected, and communicated with them only via his attorney. In addition, the report claimed, he was attempting to evict 150 tenants from their apartments.²⁸ The scandal was also worth an article on the extreme right. Under the headlines 'A Marxist as a Landlord' and 'Applied Socialism: A Profitable Profession', the Nazi Party's Berlin district newspaper *Der Angriff*, edited by Joseph Goebbels, made the same criticism on 25 April.²⁹ The article simply recycled the *Rote Fahne* information without adding any new details of its own.

Neither paper was neutral: each had its distinct reasons for attacking Müller. While the KPD had had no contact with him since his expulsion, his books had undermined several of the party's most cherished self-images and the DIV, which he supported, was a consistently merciless opponent of the stalinised KPD. Goebbels and the Nazi Party, on the other hand, scorned the revolutionaries of 1918 as 'November criminals' and saboteurs of the German army during the World War. The Nazis, of course, consistently strove to prove that they alone represented true socialism, unlike the corrupt Social Democrats or the 'Jewish-bolshevist' KPD.

While both right and left had their prejudices, many details in the original *Rote Fahne* report do correspond to those in the commercial register with

²⁸ 'Leichen-Müller als Hausbesitzer', *Rote Fahne*, 17 April 1930, 'Mieterschutz gibt's bei Müller nicht', *Rote Fahne*, 18 April 1930. A third article entitled 'Eine Niederlage Leichen-Müllers' published on 25 May 1930 reported on Müller's contacts in the public housing trust.

²⁹ 'Ein Marxist als Hausbesitzer. Angewandter "Sozialismus" – Ein Beruf der etwas einbringt', *Der Angriff*, 25 April 1930.

Mieterschutz gib's bei Müller nicht!

Wuchermieten bei Müller — Mieterausschuss wird nicht anerkannt

Unjere Veröffentlichungen über Richard Müller als Hausgratier sind bei der Berliner Arbeiterschaft auf begreifliches Interesse getreten. Wir tragen daher heute noch einige interessante Details nach.

Von großem Interesse ist das Verhältnis von Richard Müller zu seiner Phöbus-Haus G.m.b.H.

Heute noch ist ungelärt, wo die Mittel herkommen sind, mit der diese G.m.b.H. finanziert wurde.

Die Gründung der Gesellschaft reicht in das Jahr 1927 zurück. Am 1. November fand eine Gesellschaftsversammlung statt. Gesellschafter waren das Pärchen Richard Müller und Paul Meyer. Die Gesellschaft war gedacht als Treuhänder für den deutschen Industrieverband. Gegründet wurde sie mit einem Stammkapital von 20 000 Mark.

Am 5. Juli 1928 wurde in einer neuen Gesellschaftsversammlung das Kapital auf 100 000 Mark erhöht, wovon Richard Müller 60 000 Mark und Meyer 40 000 Mark bar einzahlt.

Zu jenem soll Richard Müller alleiniger Gesellschafter der Phöbus-Bau G.m.b.H. sein. Die Bauten in Panform repräsentieren nach vorsichtigen Schätzungen einen Wert von 1½ Millionen Mark. An der Errichtung soll die Wohnungsfürsorgegesellschaft erheblich mit Hauszinssteuermitteln beteiligt sein. Das wurde wahrscheinlich durch die neu aufge-

kommenen Beziehungen mit der sozialdemokratischen Bürokratie vermittelt.

Noch einige Worte, die das „soziale Verständnis“ Müllers gegenüber seinen Mietern charakterisieren. Ein 2½-Zimmerwohnung kostet bei Müller rund 95 Mark Miete. Für die Warmwasserversorgung wurde bei der Vermietung ein monatlicher Satz von 4 bis 6 Mark angegeben. In Wirklichkeit mußte eine Familie mit drei Kindern 21,25 M. für die Warmwasserumlage bezahlen.

Der von den Mietern gewählte Mieterausschuß wird von Müller nicht anerkannt. Mit seinen Mietern verkehrt er nur durch seine Rechtsanwälte.

Ein besonderes Produkt ist der Mietvertrag.

Im ersten Satz heißt es, daß die „Wohnung dem Mieterschutzgebot nicht unterliegt“. Bei nicht vollständiger Bezahlung der Miete oder nur der Untlagen hat der Vermieter das Recht, die sofortige Räumung zu verlangen.

Reparaturen und Erneuerungen hat der Mieter auf zu bezahlen. „Gegenüber der Klage auf Mietanhebung oder Räumung sind Widerlagen ungültig.“

Das sind nur einige Stichproben aus der Praxis eines sozialdemokratischen Hauswirts. Die Mieter Leichenmüllers müßten sich gegen seine ungerechten erpresserischen Maßnahmen mit aller Macht zur Wehr setzen. Durch nichts ist Müller berechtigt, drei Monate Miete im voraus einzuziehen.

'No Tenant Rights with Müller' – article from the 'Rote Fahne', 18 April 1930.

respect to Phöbus-Bau's name changes and capital infusions. It can be proven that Müller indeed changed his business from publishing to construction business. This is also confirmed by reports from DIV sources: the hints in the *Kampf-Front* regarding the 'construction issue' also match the details in the *Rote Fahne*. Phöbus-Bau received its last capital infusion in July 1928 when Müller and Weyer paid 60,000 and 40,000 Reichsmarks respectively into the company, in cash. Around 1930, however, Müller was apparently managing the company by himself: he is identified as the sole business manager in the commercial register at the time and the company address matches his private address in Berlin's Tempelhof neighbourhood.³⁰ This means that there is definitely no confusion of names: Müller, the landlord, was indeed the former Shop Steward, Richard Müller. Furthermore, the fact that Weyer is said to have made his living as a simple worker after 1933 also weighs against the idea that he still was a co-owner in Müller's company.³¹ Müller had bought out his old comrades.

³⁰ Berlin commercial register, section 2, 1930. Phöbus-Bau GmbH is listed as headquartered at Werderstrasse 31 in the 1930 registry and at Prinz-Heinrich Strasse 21 in the 1932 registry. See the *Deutsches Reichs Adreßbuch für Industrie, Gewerbe, Handel, Landwirtschaft*, Verlag Rudolf Mosse, 1930, vol. 4 and 1932 vol. 4.

³¹ Weber 1969a, vol. 2, p. 342.

From these sources, it would seem that Müller was touched by a scandal at two levels: contemporaries probably found it morally incongruous that a socialist became a landlord at all. Certainly the newspaper reports capitalised on this sense. The second level concerns the allegations of Müller's dubious practices as a landlord, at the expense of his working-class tenants. For the latter, there is no other proof than the several articles from *Rote Fahne*, a paper deeply biased against Müller. The original court papers, which would have permitted us to cross-check many facts about Müller's actual conduct as a landlord, are lost. But considering the fact that the information from the *Rote Fahne* accurately matched both the commercial register and the DIV-sources in basic points such as the name of the company, its ownership, and its periodic capital infusions, we cannot assume that the rest of the information on the conflict between Müller and his tenants is invented. It might have been exaggerated by *Rote Fahne* journalists, but I am inclined to believe that Müller did have some form of severe legal conflict with his tenants.

If Müller was indeed involved in dubious practices as a landlord, he would by no means be the only former activist from the labour movement involved in scandals such as this. Before 1918, the labour movement had been excluded from power, financing itself with small contributions from the rank and file. But in the Weimar Republic, working-class representatives could not be banned from public offices any more, and in strongholds such as the 'red Berlin', labour politicians dominated local politics. Given that the SPD still received most working-class votes, this meant that the Social Democrats were in charge. Born in poor families not unlike Richard Müller's, the working-class politicians were now in charge of the city treasury of a metropolis with more than three million inhabitants. Much money was involved, and some of it certainly found unusual and illegitimate outlets.

Dubious practices in public housing, and particularly the use of tax-funded subsidies and loans, were a recurring theme in local Berlin politics around 1930. The Communists categorically rejected the Social Democrats' housing policy in the city council assembly on the grounds that while the ostensible purpose was to provide houses for working-class families at affordable prices, the programmes consumed far more financial resources than the real cost of building the homes. According to the KPD, construction companies and cooperatives, which were anything but charitable or public spirited, were the policy's main beneficiaries. Under the circumstances, therefore, the Communist faction rejected a proposed appropriation for additional credit for public housing in fiscal year 1930. KPD assemblyman, Schwenk, summarised the rationale, saying that, 'All of this money has been spent not to increase the number of houses that are built or to reduce the rent on the houses that are available, but to

immeasurably increase the profits of the developers and building speculators'.³² In place of such a housing policy, the KPD proposed linking subsidies for landlords to granting tenants more rights to have their voices heard. The Nazis also criticised the system of public housing support, lashing out against 'capitalist exploiters', lamenting 'interest slavery', and employing socialist rhetoric, but unlike the KPD, failed to propose concrete alternatives.³³

Despite the coverage it received in the *Rote Fahne* and *Der Angriff*, the Phöbus-Bau case was not mentioned in the 1930 Berlin city council debates by either the Communists or the Nazi-Party. This was despite the fact that Joseph Goebbels and Julius Lippert, the editor and the editorial writer for the *Angriff*, were council members.³⁴

The case was brought up elsewhere, however. The German National People's Party (DNVP) deputies Howe and Ziemann opened a small inquiry into the Phöbus-Bau case in the Prussian state parliament, which referred to the article in the *Angriff*.³⁵ Unfortunately, there is no surviving response in the corresponding documents at the Prussian State Archive.³⁶

To track the affair of the tenant loans further, therefore, we must refer to another article in the *Rote Fahne* dated 25 May 1930. It reported on a fraud charge brought against Müller in the Pankow district court by his tenants. The report said that Müller had lost on all counts and was required to pay back the loans, deposits, and information fees to all of the tenants, with interest, and cover their court costs.³⁷ Given that the original court records are no longer available, these details about Müller losing the lawsuit with his tenants are also unconfirmed. What we do know for sure is only that Müller had in fact made a fortune through his construction business and that he must have had some kind of legal conflict with his tenants.

³² Stenographic minutes of the Berlin city council assembly (*Stadtverordnetenversammlung*), May 22, 1930, LArch Berlin, A Rep 000-02-01, nos. 298–301.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Although Goebbels made a name for himself with proposals concerning housing construction, he did not participate in the debates. According to the speakers' log, he did not say a single word in 1930. Lippert predominantly assumed the function of speaker for the Nazi caucus.

³⁵ See the Reichslandbund press archive, collection of articles on Richard Müller, 1919–30, BArch R/8034/III 320.

³⁶ Small inquiries were generally not recorded in the printed state parliament minutes; in the Geheime Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz (GStA PK) that today preserves the documents of the Prussian State Parliament, no information could be found either.

³⁷ 'Eine Niederlage Leichen-Müllers', *Rote Fahne* 25 May 1930. The *Angriff* did not report any further on the matter.

Drifting Back to Social Democracy?

From revolutionary to landlord – how did Müller manage such a drastic transformation? Undoubtedly it was a complex transformation in which business failure as a publisher, disappointment over the sales of his books and accompanying self-doubt about his achievement as an historian, his discernibly pessimistic assessment of the political situation as early as 1925, the schism in the DIV, and the disintegration of the union and, above all, the failed revolution and the disillusionment with the KPD as self-proclaimed heir of the ideas of 1918 all combined to destroy Richard Müller's political idealism and sense of vocation. Somewhere in that chain of defeats and failures he must have lost his faith in the inevitable worldwide revolution that had previously sustained him.

The gradual decay of Müller's political networks which must inevitably have isolated him from those among whom his earlier political work had its meaning in all likelihood also contributed to his transformation by the late 1920s. The old Shop Stewards and his Executive Council colleagues, whom he had consistently referred to as his friends,³⁸ had long since scattered. The publishing company project with Eckert and Malzahn had likewise fallen through and, given that friendship often disappears when conflict about money arises, it seems likely that the three friends were no longer in contact. Later statements from Eckert also confirm a certain disdain for Müller.³⁹ The parting with Paul Weyer may have been similarly unpleasant given that disagreements over business came into play as well.

Georg Ledebour of the USPD executive board had not only been a comrade but a personal friend.⁴⁰ But when the party split, he went with the right wing of the USPD, which also meant a personal break given the general intensity of the fight and the emotions involved. Finally, Müller's closest political companion, Ernst Däumig, who had stuck with him through thick and thin, had died long ago, in July 1922.

³⁸ For example, in a 1920 newspaper article in which he described the council system as a 'doctrine propogated so far by me and my friends'. 'Partei, Gewerkschaften und Räte in der 3. Internationale', *Freiheit*, 15 September 1920.

³⁹ Typically, in a 1956 interview Eckert said that, 'Barth should be rated much more highly than Müller'. Given that Barth had been a *persona non grata* among the Shop Stewards since late 1918, this change of heart is rather interesting. It strongly suggests that Müller and Eckert had had a serious fight. Oral history interview file for Paul Eckert, SAPMO-BArch, SG Y30/0180, p. 15 as well as p. 11 for a similar statement from 1951.

⁴⁰ See Ledebour 1954, pp. 61f.

Many of his old friendships had therefore come to an end. The fact that those friendships were all formed in a political milieu that Müller had likewise been alienated from also points toward isolation. His social relationships probably concentrated more and more on his family circle. This withdrawal into private life probably increased the importance of material issues, including securing a future for his children, and was part of Richard Müller's transformation into a businessman in his late forties.⁴¹

In contrast with his failure in publishing, Müller was successful in construction and accumulated a great deal of property. According to the official business register, his firm's capital grew from 20,000 to 100,000 Reichsmarks between 1927 and 1928 and it is likely that the actual value of the company was substantially greater. The construction business had already made Müller a wealthy man while it was still a DIV 'trust company', and around 1930 he was a millionaire, if the *Rote Fahne* is to be believed. As such, his old political ideas fell by the wayside somewhere during that process.

His newfound affluence was probably one reason why Müller left his home in Tempelhof, where he had lived since at least 1918, and moved to a pastoral piece of lakeside property outside Berlin.⁴² The new house near Königs Wusterhausen also outwardly marked the start of a new lifestyle.

Richard Müller's last known written text is a letter dated September 1932 in which he is offering to sell another part of his extensive collection of documents, this time to the ADGB archive. The papers were minutes of the founding congress of the Red International of Labour Unions in July 1921, including the letter on the union question he had received from Lenin during the congress. Müller offered the documents to the ADGB archive with the title 'Materials on the Creation of the RGO (*Revolutionäre Gewerkschaftsopposition*)'. By giving the collection that title, Müller was making the case that the developments as early as 1921 could be seen as presaging the contemporary KPD policy of installing its own revolutionary unions. Müller's letter not only summarised and categorised the content of the documents, but also reiterated his positions of 1921, emphasising above all his insistence that the Communists remain in the established ADGB unions. He praised Lenin's intervention on behalf of that

⁴¹ The profession listed for Richard Müller's son Arno Hugo on his resident's registration card is also 'salesman'. He may have acted as his father's partner, see LArch EMK.

⁴² The new address appears in correspondence from 1932. See *Materialien über die Entstehung der RGO*, SAPMO-BArch, RY 23/45. Werderstrasse 31 was still listed as the company headquarters in the 1930 commercial register.

position and criticised Fritz Heckert's opposition as setting the stage for the fragmentation of the union movement, especially its left.⁴³

Tellingly, the letter made no direct reference to Müller's current politics. Instead, it only defended his views from that earlier time. The offer of sale probably sprang from mixed motives. On one hand, selling the documents probably represented a further distancing from his revolutionary past – offering the letter from Lenin, which certainly must have had personal value to him, particularly signifies that. On the other hand, he may have been driven by archival concerns in wanting to see these unique documents safeguarded.⁴⁴ It is interesting that he offered the archive specifically to the ADGB unions, whose leadership he had consistently fought against in the past. That choice primarily appears to have been directed against the KPD's current 'revolutionary' unionism.

Certainly this was Müller supporting his old line again, despite his engagement with the DIV in the interim, and it is possible that he was, by this time, also moving closer to the ADGB despite its business-friendly politics. After all, the splinter politics of the KPD's revolutionary unionism had never appealed to him and only increased his aversion to the party even as he was digesting the verdict of failure that history had delivered on the concept of the revolutionary industrial union. The fact that Müller added internal instructions from the Red International's central European office on the training and working methods of its workplace cells to the sale of documents indicates a certain political proximity to the ADGB. Although the documents were already eleven years old, enough had remained unchanged in the KPD's union strategies for the documents to retain a certain revelatory charge. And, for the rest, they would also be useful to the Social Democratic press as propaganda material. Neither a loyal communist nor a dissenting one would have made these documents available to the Social Democrats. Although Müller quite militantly defended his old views in the accompanying letter and again shows Lenin in a positive light, he may have made peace with the Social Democratic union apparatus – perhaps a consequence of his contacts with the public housing trust, which was also a Social Democrat-dominated bureaucracy. Whether or not he did in fact re-join the SPD, however, is unconfirmed.

43 *Materialien über die Entstehung der RGO*, SAPMO-BArch, RY 23/45.

44 In this case, he appears not to have been driven by monetary concerns given his healthy finances and the fact that the ADGB archive initially only offered him 75 Reichsmarks (the final sale price is unknown), see *Materialien über die Entstehung der RGO*, SAPMO-BArch, RY 23/45.

Returning to Obscurity

There is almost no trace of Richard Müller after 1932. He had withdrawn from politics and, as his company no longer appeared in the official Berlin commercial register, it seems likely that he had sold it before 1932 in order to retire.⁴⁵ It is not until five years later that a report on Müller surfaces again: a second marriage was registered in Berlin's registry office no. 6 in 1937. Whether the first marriage had ended in divorce or his wife's death is unknown as is, for the moment at least, the name of his second wife.⁴⁶

Richard Müller appears not to have offered any public resistance to Nazi rule. Certainly, no evidence of judicial or police prosecution against him has survived in the relevant archives nor any indicating that his relatives applied for compensation or recognition after 1945 on account of his having been a victim of fascism. Despite the Nazis' hatred for the 'November criminals' of 1918, he appears to have been left alone – possibly because by the time the Nazis took power he had been politically inactive for many years. Richard Müller was not a person who posed a significant threat to the regime and even the author of the article about his allegedly corrupt practices as a landlord in the *Angriff* had probably forgotten about him by the time that Hitler took power in March 1933. Müller's books were, however, subject to censorship and even to the Nazis' ritual book burnings on 10 May 1933.⁴⁷ While former Revolutionary Shop Stewards and friends of Müller, such as Paul Eckert or Heinrich Malzahn, were persecuted by the Nazis, this was not on account of their past but of their resistance activities. Both survived Nazi rule nonetheless. The same applies to Müller's DIV colleague Paul Weyer, who resumed life as a worker after 1933.⁴⁸ Former Shop Steward Paul Wegmann, on the other hand, was snared

⁴⁵ According to details from the Charlottenburg district court (Handelsgericht Charlottenburg), the company was finally removed from the commercial register in 1937, although its business activities may have come to an end years earlier. In that case, it would make sense that it no longer appeared in registries: neither the trade directory *Berliner Adressbuch*, Verlag August Scherl, 1934, nor the *Deutsche Reichs-Adressbuch für Industrie, Gewerbe, Handel* of 1937 lists a Phöbus-Bau GmbH.

⁴⁶ According to research by Andreas Herbst, the marriage was registered under no. 578/1937 in Berlin's registry office no. 6 in the present-day neighborhood of Mitte. Further details such as the name of the wife are unknown, since the register is still in use and subject to laws on privacy protection.

⁴⁷ Apparently the entire Malik-Verlag catalogue fell victim to book burning. See Hauberg 1986.

⁴⁸ Malzahn was active in the resistance and was sentenced to six months in prison in 1940, see Weber and Herbst 2004, pp. 408ff. On Weyer, see Weber 1969a, vol. 2, p. 342.

by the regime. He spent the last ten years of his life in various concentration camps and died in Bergen Belsen in 1945.⁴⁹

It must not have been easy for those who were spared the terror to endure their own impotence and watch all their own dreams and political ideals literally end in flames. We cannot, however, speculate as to how Richard Müller himself survived fascism. Despite the dark premonitions about the forward march of the swastika as early as 1925, the actual violence and destructive power of Nazism must have shocked and distressed him. No one in the ranks of the labour movement had foreseen the total defeat that was to come.

The Nazis did not drive him into exile, however. Reference books by Wilhelm Heinz Schröder and Sabine Ross, among others, wonder whether he emigrated, but the information about the marriage contradicts that hypothesis.⁵⁰ It is more plausible to assume that he gave up politics and contact with his old comrades by and large after he ended his engagement with the DIV and, along with his new wife, withdrew into private life, avoiding conflict with the regime as a result.

Richard Müller died on 11 May 1943; the cause of death is unknown.⁵¹ From the only account we have of his funeral, a letter by his long-time collaborator Cläre Casper,⁵² we know that his funeral was a small one. The location of the grave is unknown today.

49 Sandvoß 1983, p. 57.

50 See Schröder 1986 and Roß 2000. The information about his emigration to the US must have originated from the Moscow RGASPI file that collects documents on several persons bearing the name Richard Müller, one of them the protagonist of this research, see Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343.

51 Register of deaths, no. 1463/43, Berlin-Tiergarten registry office. The author would like to thank Andreas Herbst of the Memorial to the German Resistance for this piece of information.

52 Personal notification, Prof. Ingo Materna. According to Materna, the letter written by Cläre Casper to Ingo Materna also said that Casper was not personally present at the funeral.

Conclusion: The Darkness of History

What is left of Richard Müller? Politically, there is no doubt that he was one of the most influential figures in the German labour movement between 1916 and 1921. But the fact that he is now almost completely unknown to the general public is a result of the nature and circumstances of his achievements as well as failures. Unlike Karl Liebknecht, Müller never became a legend on the left. Liebknecht was a man of big gestures, a risk-taker, a voluntarist, and revolutionary romantic. For him there was never anything but the forward march, the frontal assault; retreat was not an option. He died like he lived: in the thick of the movement, at the forefront of an uprising, and under fire from the counter-revolution. Hundreds of thousands of people attended his funeral procession and his grave remains an important place of pilgrimage for the left today.

But there were no dramatic gestures or great gambits in Müller's career, nor did it end theatrically amid gunfire in a revolutionary tragedy, with a massive funeral procession forming the closing scene. He had emerged from the working class to become its leader. Such origins made him mindful of the limits of working-class endurance and he was never a risk-taker. The one occasion he ventured a big gesture – declaring that a national assembly would convene in revolutionary Germany 'only over my dead body'¹ at the general assembly of the Berlin worker's councils on 19 November 1918 – he earned the ignominy of a derisive nickname, *Leichenmüller* (Corpse-Müller), that would pursue him to the end of his days. His withdrawal from the political stage came with a slow loss of political influence, a development that had started with the weakening of the Executive Council in late 1918. At some point, Richard Müller simply disappeared, leaving few traces of the rest of his life. Having emerged out of obscurity, he disappeared again into the darkness.

But like Liebknecht, with his grand gestures and tragic-heroic funeral, Müller also departed in a fitting way. Throughout his life, Müller had been absorbed with organisational work, work that was undone over and over again by the course of events. His was truly the fate of Sisyphus and in its face, even his remarkable persistence petered out and the dogged worker of the revolution was forgotten. The steep ups and downs of Müller's political life were bound up with his being that very unusual thing in the European working-class movement: a working-class leader who rose through the institutions of the working-

¹ Engel, Holtz and Materna 1993, pp. 154 and 184.

class movement to assume leadership of it at a critical moment in history. Both Müller and Liebknecht failed along with their Revolution, which was crushed by violence and ruined by its own weaknesses and inconsistency. Both fought that verdict of history with all their strength as committed revolutionaries. Each failed in his characteristic way – one as a martyr, the other in oblivion.

Richard Müller had started his political career at the very bottom, as an orphan and a destitute apprentice who rose to become a union representative, chairman of the DMV agitation committee, and spokesman for all Berlin's lathe operators. Throughout his political life, Müller's finger remained on the political pulse of the working class and his revolutionary ardour was always attuned to the extent of its political ambition and the limits of its endurance. Detailed union work would characterise his career and his political *modus operandi*. Everything had to be organised and Richard Müller was good at that: that was why he rose to his positions of leadership. The Revolutionary Shop Stewards, a model for the combination of secrecy and mass influence, were also a product of his organisational talent. They too combined radicalism and pragmatism. Like their leader, the Stewards also refused to expose themselves to unnecessary danger, but when the time was right and everything was at stake, they struck without fear of personal consequences, consequences which could be considerable for these workers and their families. Many of the workers who were actively against the war did not live to see the German Revolution. They were conscripted into the army and lost their lives amid barbed wire and machine gun fire in some grey no man's land in Flanders or outside Verdun. Richard Müller was also threatened with that fate more than once and the unconditional support of his comrades was no small factor in his multiple escapes from military service.

While he may not have been a risk-taker, Richard Müller was able to take courageous action when necessary. It was not easy for him during the Great War to oppose the pro-war position of the union that was his political home. Many unionists preferred to put a good face on things and avoid the issue because pro-war union officials were released from military service starting in 1916. Breaking with accustomed practice was also not easy for Müller. He hesitated and wavered over and over, but not due to fear. Rather the hesitation and wavering arose from loyalty to the organisation. He wanted neither to betray nor abandon the Metalworkers Union where he had spent so much of his life. The union was his home, where his friends were. It was also his political identity. Despite, or maybe precisely because of, this extremely strong bond, when the time came, he opted to give up the form so as to better advance the spirit by building up the Stewards as a parallel working-class organisation. This and his later work for a communist unionism and the Red International

of Labour Unions were denounced as 'splits', as divisive work that sabotaged working-class unity. But in fact, Müller never advocated splitting the union movement which he saw as the fundamental form of working-class politics. In fact, he always fought for the vision of a global working-class unity against the national fragmentation that befell the international labour movement in 1914.

For many people, that contradiction between form and spirit, between the rhetoric and reality, of a unionism that called itself socialist and internationalist, but was predisposed to reformism and nationalist integration only became clear because of the war. The origins of this integration were complex; they were due to more than mere moral failure on the part of leaders and 'labour aristocrats' betraying their class. It was Müller who pointed out that German unionism had been paradoxically corrupted by its own success – the workers had achieved much, thanks to their high degree of organisation, but, precisely because of that, they had more to lose than their chains.

In this context, the war revealed the mainstream of the SPD leadership to be revolutionary only in rhetoric and reformist and collaborationist in practice, but it also revealed that substantial parts of the party and unions, including figures like Müller, had not confused the success of reforms with reformism. They emerged as the leaders of the revolutionary movements that were now pitted against Germany's capitalist class and state as well as the SPD leadership.

In 1914 Müller opposed the ban on strikes, organising them without the permission of the official union structures. During this act of disobedience, Müller became radicalised along with his fellow workers. He moved from social struggle to militant pacifism. By 1917 at the latest, he had put all his energy and organisational might in the service of the social revolution and he would later defend the necessity of that revolution again and again despite a nearly interminable series of defeats. If Müller and the revolutionaries were often alone and isolated, little more than 'a small minority in the dull grey swamp', as Däumig once put it,² they nonetheless persevered. It was only at the end of his life, worn down by still more failures and probably unable to give meaningful expression to his ideals that Müller seems to have silently abandoned them. Was he cynical or did he simply mellow with age? What exactly were the facts behind the Phöbus scandal? Had he picked up a double standard to leave his revolutionary past behind and establish himself as a building contractor? We do not know.

Richard Müller was occasionally criticised for not having the stature for his leading role within the German Revolution. His pragmatism, it was claimed, was nothing more than foot-dragging. Some also criticised him for having a

² Meeting of the USPD workers' councils on 9 January 1919, SAPMO BArch, RY 19/II/143/2.

'tendency toward schematism', pointing in particular to his rendition of his council system, with its 'little boxes', which he doggedly continued to advocate long after its political implementation had become illusory. When the March strike in 1919 was crushed by a military bloodbath, the council movement had lost its final battle. Nevertheless, Müller and others stubbornly tried to save as much as possible from its ideals well into 1920, even after the Works Councils Act limited the councils to a minor role within a system of industrial relations that was in essence class collaborationist.

Although these criticisms came from the Spartacists, Social Democrats, and Marxist-Leninists, none of whom had been particularly fond of Müller, they do contain kernels of truth. Müller did, in fact, repeatedly get mired in organisational detail. With time-consuming thoroughness, Müller so often wanted to draft guidelines first where some revolutionary haste was probably in order. Not granting the workers' councils any more extensive authority in November 1918 out of fear that the economy might collapse undoubtedly was an instance of this indecision and obsession with detailed planning. His loyalty sometimes prevailed over his good sense, as when he adhered to an Executive Council that had ceased to be a motor of the Revolution after being forced to hand over most of its powers to the SPD-dominated Central Council in December 1918. But Müller would not and could not abandon the post that the Revolution had bestowed upon him. While it was true that the Executive Council remained the highest revolutionary institution for the industrial region of Berlin, even there it was immobilised by the stalemate between the USPD and Social Democrats. In this situation, Müller tried with all his strength to control the tide of special requests, applications, petitions, complaints, and trivialities and do meaningful work in the Executive Council but these efforts bore little fruit and less glory than ever. Müller saw the board's powerlessness quite clearly, but he always hoped for a new revolutionary offensive. In workers' council elections, a left-wing majority would have granted the Executive Council more authority again and finally implemented the arduously worked out council guidelines and election rules. But when that moment finally came in spring 1919, it was already too late. The Executive Council had got its left majority, but the counterrevolution had an army ready to crush any attempts to re-vitalise the practice of council socialism.

In the end, however, there was also something deeply admirable about Müller's persistence. Three times he built up organisations to serve the Revolution – the Executive Council, the Berlin Works Council and finally the Communist Union Centre of the KPD – equipping them for effective action in the fast-changing political situation. With these he tried to push things forward. Each time, his work was destroyed: first at the hands of Noske's troops,

then through Dissmann's resolutions, and finally through the authoritarianism of the central committee of the KPD. A fourth occasion came when he worked to organise the small left-wing union DIV together with his old Comrade Paul Weyer – and again it failed. Unfortunately, very little is known about his activities there.

What we know about these organisations shows that Müller was not really as preoccupied with organisational minutiae or schematic or blinded by loyalty as his critics would have us believe. While he clung stubbornly to his independent assessment of the needs and tolerance of the working class, he was able to improvise new organisational forms quite quickly and set to work on rebuilding with the same energy as soon as he found himself at a dead end. Through the various changes of course that events required Richard Müller to make, he remained true to his principles, even swimming against the tide, if that was what it took.

Placing himself at the service of the Revolution, where necessary even against his own movement, showed a particular kind of strength. It took tremendous courage to say no on the evening of 6 January 1919 when the decision to stage an uprising in Berlin was nearly unanimous and the euphoria and group pressure made any deviation look like weakness. His steadfast refusal to support the entirely unsuccessful March Action of 1921 despite overwhelming pressure also displayed his courage. It ultimately cost him his position and ended his career within the KPD. Richard Müller was always a collectively oriented person characterised by community and solidarity – be it in the large family of his childhood, in the working collective of the lathe shop, or as a union representative in the labour movement.

Yet when it mattered, he could step out of the crowd and make his own decisions. The Richard Müller who was characterised by the Communists in his time, and later by the Marxist-Leninists, as hesitant and indecisive turns out to have been more resolute than many a veteran Communist. While the party Communists were often heroic leaders and shapers of historical events, willing to risk everything and spend their lives in fascist torture chambers, within their own party they proved abjectly unable to stem the growing dictatorship of the bureaucracy.³

In his desire for independence, however, Müller was not alone. He was merely the outstanding example of a whole series of 'workers of the Revolution' who always pragmatically did their part and were capable of disciplined and unified action, but never gave up their independence. Those qualities characterised the Shop Stewards, most of whom did not get very far in the KPD because

³ I would like to thank Dr. Ulla Plener for pointing this out.

they took their council activism seriously and would not allow themselves to be degraded to the status of disposable objects in the name of Communism.⁴ Richard Müller drifted into oblivion well before his death because the council socialism he had worked to realise all his life fell off the rails of history around the end of the Weimar Republic. Although the DIV and similar organisations still offered platforms for independent socialist politics, they could never assert themselves against the power of the Social Democratic and Communist apparatuses. For the decades to come, the opposition between Communism and Social Democracy would dominate the political stage, above all in divided Germany, and suppress the political memory of the councils and their supporters. Dozens of streets in Germany are named after Karl Liebknecht or Friedrich Ebert. None of the Richard Müller Streets in Fulda, Breisach, and Obermoschel, however, are named for the council activist but recall various other men who went by the same name.⁵

It was only in the wake of a student movement that was able to break out of the 'Democracy vs. Communism' dichotomy that undogmatic Marxism and thoughts of grassroots socialism became interesting again and Richard Müller's writings were republished.⁶ Only then did Müller acquire his monument: his works remain among the most captivating accounts of the German Revolution. However, the man behind the work still remained obscure. As we have seen, he hardly mentioned himself in his own books, holding true to an almost self-abnegating style of writing in the third person. And although these histories are quite well known among experts, until now there have only been footnotes and small dictionary entries with sparse, sometimes erroneous information about Müller himself.

I have tried to change that situation with the present work. I hope that I have managed not only to dig up a few new details but also to shed more light

⁴ In 1924, Müller himself stated that, 'It is telling that of the more than 1,000 Revolutionary Shop Stewards during the Great War, fewer than ten are members of the KPD today and that most of the others have been left bitter and party-less on the sidelines of the labor movement'. See *Begründung der Beschwerde an das Exekutivkomitee der K.I.*, in Lichnoe delo Mjuller, Richard [Personal file Richard Müller]; RGASPI Moscow, F. 495, op. 205, d. 9343; p. 18.

⁵ The Richard-Müller-Straße in Obermoschel is named after Palatinate dialect poet Richard Müller (1861–1924) and in Fulda after Centre Party parliamentarian Richard Müller (1851–1931). The origin of the street in Breisach is unclear.

⁶ By the 1980s they were out of print again. Müller's writings have only been republished recently in the new edition *Eine Geschichte der Novemberrevolution*, containing all three works in one volume, a biographical essay on Müller, an index, and a chronology of the German Revolution: see Müller 2011. Unfortunately, there has not been an English translation so far.

on Müller's character and to increase awareness of his and his political tendency's centrality in the German Revolution. Richard Müller was not cut out to be a hero. He did not become a famous martyr like Liebknecht, lacking the temperament as well as the opportunity, nor the captain of a revolutionary state like Lenin, lacking the sort of resolution that so often had to shade into brutality.

So this book does not add a new hero to the old list, nor was that its purpose. Instead it portrays Müller as the Sisyphus of the Revolution who was ultimately destroyed by the scale of his political task, changed sides, and eventually gave up his revolutionary vocation. That is what makes him a human and interesting figure. What use is a model on a pedestal if it remains out of reach? Implementing council socialism of any kind is not a job for iconic heroes. What it would need is the steady and constant work of many individuals, perhaps ordinary but certainly independent figures. Müller was one of these and that is his legacy.

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<i>Der Arbeiter-Rat</i>	Berlin council newspaper 1919–20, organ of the Berlin Works Council Centre from 1920
<i>Die Rote Fahne</i>	Central organ of the Spartacus League and the KPD, 1918–33
<i>Die Freiheit</i>	Berlin organ of the USPD, 1918–22
<i>Der Kommunistische Gewerkschafter</i>	The KPD's union paper starting in 1921, successor to the <i>Arbeiter-Rat</i>
<i>Deutsche Metallarbeiter-Zeitung</i>	est. 1883, main organ of the German Metalworkers' Union (DMV) 1890–1933
<i>Kampf-Front</i>	Weekly proletarian periodical starting in 1924, main organ of the left-wing union German Industrial Association (DIV); published in separate Leipzig and Berlin editions after the split in 1929
<i>Die Republik</i>	1918–19, associated with the USPD, edited by Wilhelm Herzog
<i>Sowjet</i>	Monthly Communist periodical, originally based in Vienna, Berlin organ of Paul Levi's opposition on the periphery of the KPD starting in 1921
<i>Vorwärts</i>	est. in 1876 as the main organ of the SPD; reestablished in 1891 as a daily newspaper

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